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ANDY McNAMARA
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andy@gameinformer.com

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It's Hard To Say Goodbye

I was 19 when the first issue of *Game Informer* released back in 1991. For me, it was a dream come true. There I was. In print. Official. I had done something I (and my parents) thought was impossible: I turned my love of video games into a job.

By some miracle, I've had that job my whole adult life. I worked hard, moved up, and had the pleasure of being part of *Game Informer* every step of the way. However, this is where that journey ends; after 327 issues, this will be my last one. I'm stepping away from games journalism.

I've had the time of my life here. I owe some of my best friends and most memorable experiences to this place. Countless people throughout this industry have inspired me, believed in me, trusted me, and ultimately fought with me to make *Game Informer* the best we could make it. Things were not always easy; we had a long road to success with plenty of challenges, but I was always proud of the *Game Informer* team spirit that could fight through anything.

Over the last 29 years, I have had the privilege to work with so many talented and amazing people. Andy Reiner (your new editor-in-chief) and I have worked side by side for 26 years – month after month, issue after issue. I don't have the space here to individually thank everyone who is woven into *Game Informer*'s history, but you can find their names in every issue over the decades, and I am always happy to tell stories about our adventures together.

I am not leaving the game industry, so my time with these people (or you) is not done. It will just no longer take place under the *Game Informer* banner – unless they invite me to be a guest on one of their shows! Please?

To the fans of *Game Informer*, there is no way for me to convey the depth of my gratitude for your support. From print and online to our shows and podcasts, you have always been the reason we do what we do. You are all part of the *Game Informer* family.

The team here is so talented, you will barely notice my absence. Please support them in all they do. It is just time for me to try something new.

I love you, *Game Informer* fam, and I always will.

Enjoy the issue!

Cheers,

P.S. I'm not dead! Follow me on Twitter @TheRealAndyMc. Let's talk games! Special shout-out to my Funcoland peeps! *Drops mic*

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

32 Cyberpunk 2077

We spent hours exploring CD Projekt Red's dystopian future city, and came back with a full report on this positively massive action/RPG.
by Matt Miller and Kimberley Wallace

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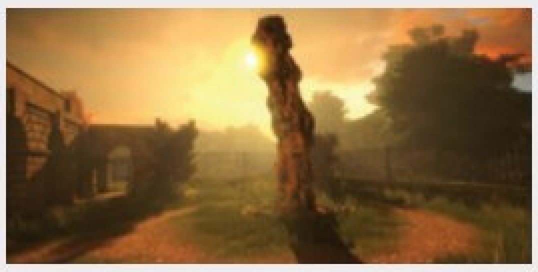
A detailed first look at the system, along with PS5 games covering a swath of genres.



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We explore how Intelligent Systems crafted new surprises for a familiar adventure.

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59 **Samurai Jack** Hands-on with new adventures based on Genndy Tartakovsky’s animated show.

60 **Destiny 2: Beyond Light** Find out what Bungie has in store for the franchise until 2022.

63 **Metal: Hellsinger** Shred demons to pieces in this rhythm game.

68 **Maquette** Navigate a love story in this inventive puzzler.

71 **Maneater** It’s feeding time for this insatiable shark in this revenge story.

75 **Minecraft Dungeons** The franchise’s move to the action/RPG space isn’t flawless.

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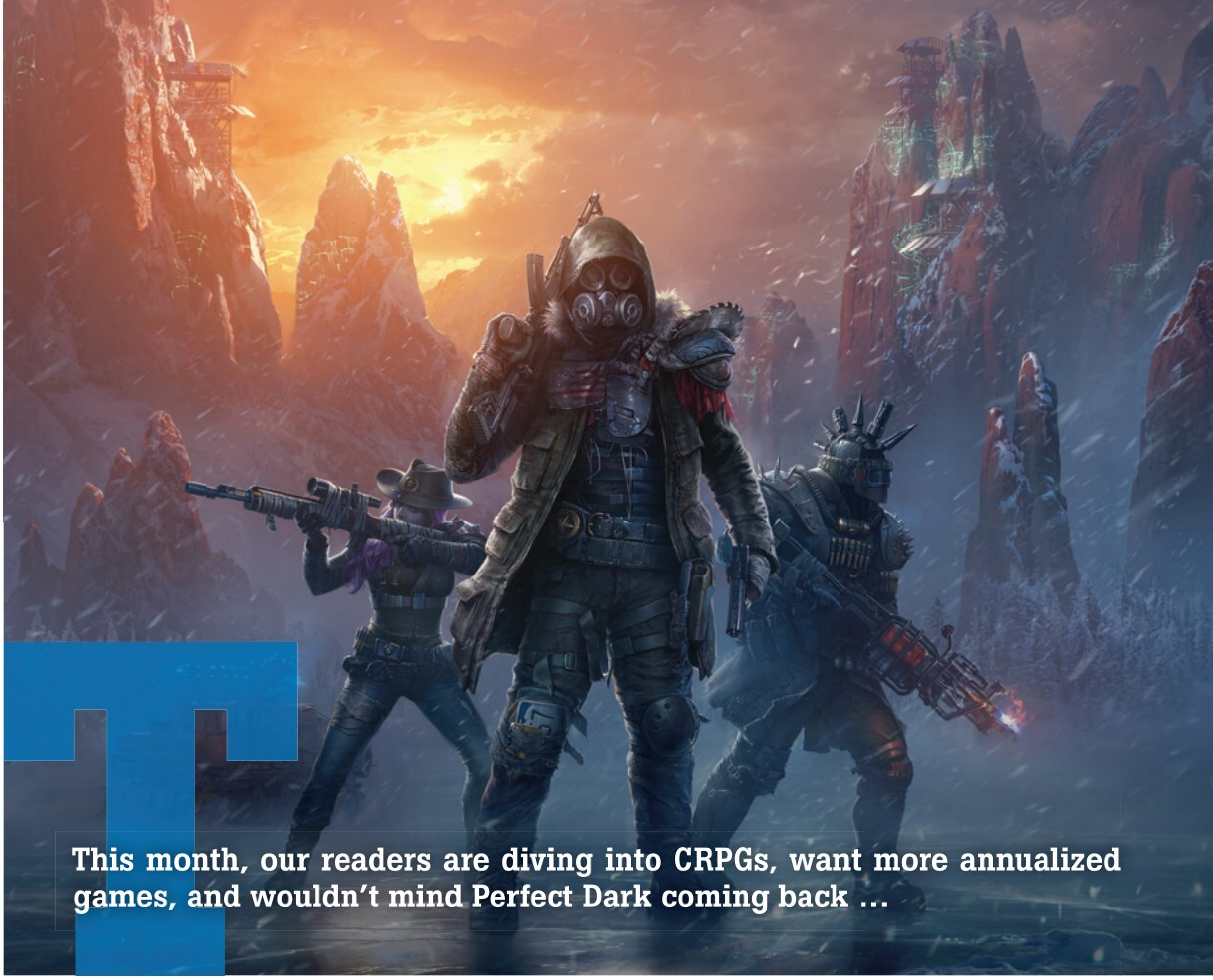


This month, our readers are diving into CRPGs, want more annualized games, and wouldn't mind Perfect Dark coming back …

Discovering A New Genre

Been reading your work since 1999, and whenever I see an image of a game with a top-down perspective, I lose interest in it. With Wasteland 3 on your newest cover, I didn't think I would get much out of this issue. Every image from that game is top-down, same goes for all of the games in the following stories. Since you wrote so passionately about the Wasteland series, I decided to give one a try since it was on Game Pass. HOLY MOLEY! I've been missing out! These games are fantastic! So deep. So rich in strategy. And surprisingly perfect for console! The front of my gaming backlog is now Wasteland 1, 2, and Divinity: Original Sin II. Thanks for turning an old timer onto something new!

Your friend, Alejandro
Houston, TX

Glad that the Wasteland games are finally getting the respect they deserve. Wasteland is in my opinion a far superior series to Fallout now, even though I'd say Fallout 3 is the best of all of them. For people who haven't tried them, start with Wasteland 2 – it's a masterpiece that gives you so much control over your destiny. Can't wait to play Wasteland 3!

Heather Hawthorne
Yakima, WA

I don't think Wasteland 3 is for me, but after reading what you had to say about Divinity: Original Sin II, me and my buddy jumped into it online and have been having a blast. It's one of the best cooperative games to date, and the perfect game for the pandemic world. We're lost in a world of wonder and strategy. Thanks for the awesome history piece on CRPGs that made us discover this game. Moving forward, more history stories, please!

Starlin Francisco
via email

CRPGs' isometric viewpoint may not scream "immersion," but the games we rounded up deliver incredible stories, are rich in character, and take you on amazing adventures. If you haven't gotten into these games yet, our readers highlight good starting points, and we urge you to take a look at our writeups from the last issue to find out which game fits your gaming needs. This is one genre you don't want to sleep on.

From PC To Console

I was looking at the 2020 releases for games, and Microsoft is really not putting out much I would be interested in. Why can't Ubisoft remake Silent Hunter for the console? Or Panzer Commander? How about another Thief game in third person? That last game would have been great in third person. There are constant remakes coming out. Why not redo some of the old games that were PC only and make them for console? With new technology these games would be fantastic.

Mike
Plainfield, IL

You are totally right: Most of the remakes we are seeing these days are of console games. There are dozens if not hundreds of PC classics that we think could shine once again as a remake and also find a new audience on console. We'd love to see all of LucasArts' adventure games come back as a collection optimized for console play.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Navigating Anxiety In Quarantine With Simulation Games

I'm a super uncool single mom of a very driven 11-year-old gamer son. I'm also a nearly lifelong anxiety sufferer. I've been unemployed for the past two months due to COVID-19, my son has been online learning (and will be for the remainder of the school year), and my anxiety has been at an all-time high. We also live with a high-risk family member and aging pet with medical issues – it's been rough.

Video games often get a bad rap for "rotting the brain," and I'll admit I've done my share of belittling their purpose in the past. Most gameplay just never made sense to my brain except to spectate; I just didn't get it. Now I have Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp on my phone, play Mario Party regularly with my son, and have just been more involved in gaming in general. We don't have all the latest and greatest of everything, but it's something, and it definitely makes a difference. I honestly don't know where my family would be emotionally without the escapism of game play during this time – sometimes it's been our only positive connection.

I've been a quiet mental-health advocate for a long time and really appreciate your platform taking the time to address the link between gaming and coping, as well as providing truly valuable resources. We all need peace, calm, stress relief – the works – right now, and you're in there fighting the good fight.

Kimberley, thanks for backing up with research and personal experience that the kids, both young and old, might just be all right.

Cheers, much love, and many thanks.

Kate Link
via email

Game Gear Micro

I recently saw Sega is bringing back the Game Gear as a mini collection in Japan. I never had a Game Gear, and would probably buy an authentically sized re-release with the software loaded on it, but what Sega is offering is weird. I don't want to buy four different versions just to play different games. Can the games even be enjoyed on a screen that small? I have my doubts.

Mike
Plainfield, IL

We have the same concerns that you do. This is an odd revival on Sega's part that screams "gimmick." Although we haven't gotten our hands on the Micro yet, the screen looks ridiculously small and the buttons are right on top of each other. Time will tell, but we sure hope Sega is also thinking about releasing a bigger version with more games on it.

Something Is Missing Without E3

I think we're now seeing just how big of a hole E3 leaves when it doesn't happen. The video game news hasn't been the same without it. The livestreams from companies revealing their new games don't hit with the same impact or levels of excitement. A stream happens, we talk about it for a day, and then nothing. We need E3 back.

Jenny Phillips
Austin, MN

Given health concerns with COVID-19, we don't know what the future of conventions like E3 will look be, but we hope they come back in a big way. E3 is the time when all eyes around the world are on video games. It's a showcase of new technology and experiences that is unlike anything else. Here's hoping we get back to normal in 2021 and E3 (or something else just like it) is a big part of restoring the things we love.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"If sports don't happen this year, what are the odds of sports games hitting in 2021?"

That's a great question: We have a feeling some sports will happen, but if they didn't, games shouldn't be affected. Digital stadiums could still be packed with digital fans. What happens with rosters and the like would be the big question.

"What microphones do you use on the Game Informer Show? You sound so clean."

Those would be the Shure SM7B Cardioid Dynamic Microphone. Well worth the investment if you get into streaming.

Best Comment:

"Can human beings hibernate?"

Question Of The Month:

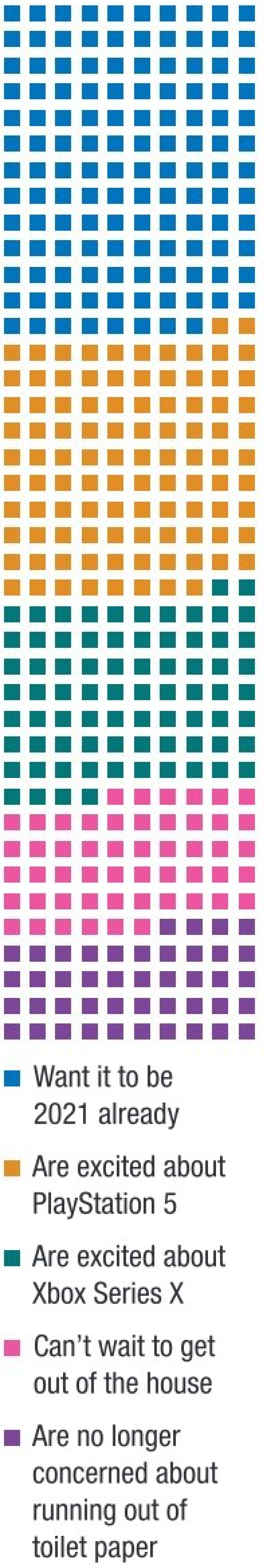
If you could have any video game animal as a pet, what would it be?

gi spy

(Left) PR power couple Valerie & Shaun Norton from Sandbox Strategies working on all kinds of cool upcoming games. **(Right)** Insomniac Games' James Stevenson and GI's Andrew Reiner decided to go bird watching instead of talking about the future of Spider-Man.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Annualized Games

I know annualized games get a bad rap, but last holiday season felt a little empty without a new Assassin's Creed game. The release of that series (and Call of Duty for that matter) are like holidays for me. We need those big games each year. I love them, and I know millions of other people do too.

"The Eradicator"
Toledo, OH

Call of Duty continues to be one of the best-selling games each year, and Activision has done a tremendous job of keeping that series fresh. Ubisoft took a year off with Assassin's Creed, but didn't leave fans empty-handed: The Assassin's Creed Odyssey DLC "Fate of Atlantis" is massive in size and basically a full game. If you haven't ventured into that experience (which we loved here at *Game Informer*), jump in before Assassin's Creed Valhalla hits later this year.

PERFECT DARK

Reader Responses

Last month we asked readers which franchise they would most like to see return on next-generation machines. Here's what they had to say …

I want another Typing of the Dead game for PC; also I wouldn't complain if Square Enix released a legitimate sprite sequel to Chrono Trigger.

Dale Kroegger

Perfect Dark! Most of the futuristic shooters lack color and originality in the world and weapons. That's where Perfect Dark shines. It's borderline cyberpunk, but ends up just being a cool vision of the future.

Ted Lowne

There are many series I would want to make a triumphant return, but in particular I want a new multi-platform Fatal Frame title. Fatal Frame 5 was pretty good, but Nintendo hasn't really treated the IP with the respect it deserves – especially considering that us Western fans STILL haven't gotten an official FF4 release. I'm not conceited enough to say that the first three games were perfect, but I really don't like the gimmicky controls and difficulty in accessing the last two titles. If Fatal Frame 6 was made with PlayStation and Xbox fans in mind, it would be a welcome return to survival-horror form!

Joselyn Meadows

Given how everything is going in the world, might as well bring back Duke Nukem in a new game to make 2020 the truly worst year ever.

Miles Felton

(Left) Bruce Kelly, Game Designer, Massive Entertainment **(Right)** Dan Amrich, Content Game Designer, Ubisoft San Francisco

super TOP SeKRET STUFF!!!
wow

WINNER

1 Nicole Hensley

All along, Dutch's big "plan" was just to commission thoughtful, stunning portraits of his best friends.

2 Aaron Dorsey

Thanks to Ni No Kuni, we can print this cool picture of animation legend Hayao Miyazaki because it is technically related to video games.

3 Lyndsey Dison

His long con finally exposed, Mario is forced to admit he has no idea what a plumber even does.

4 Ashland Williams, Age 10

Unless there's a flashing star in that question block, this fight will be messy.

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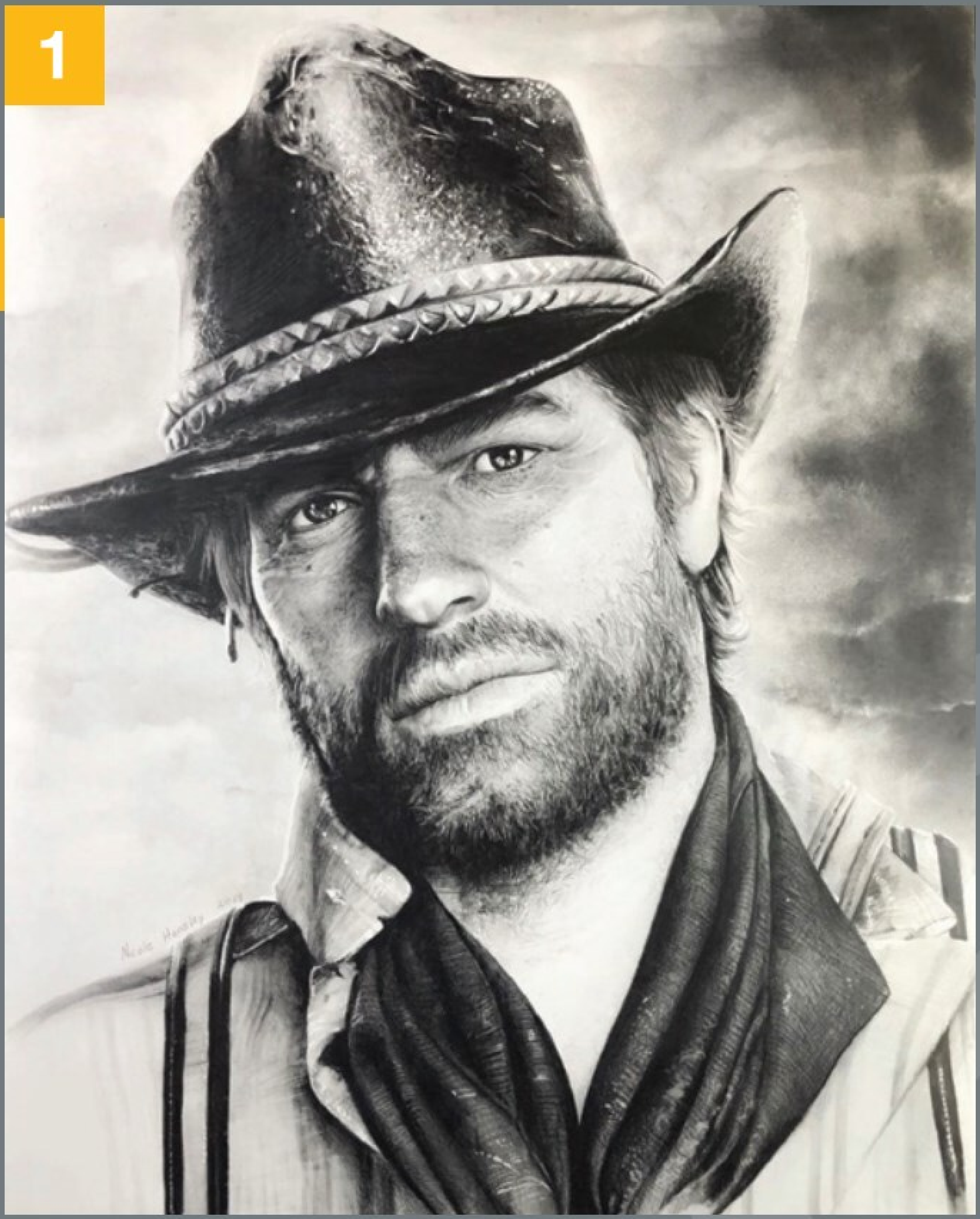

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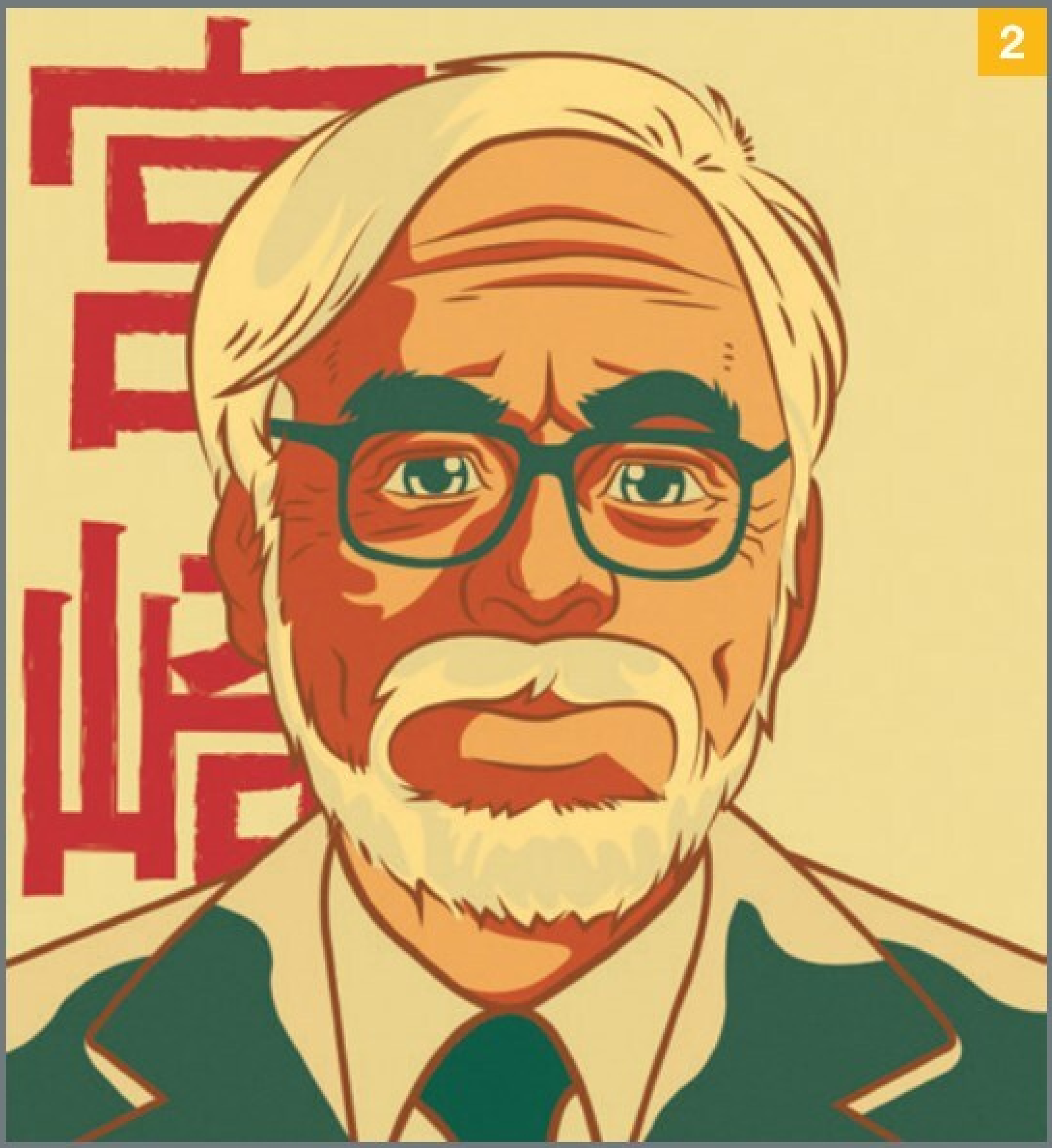

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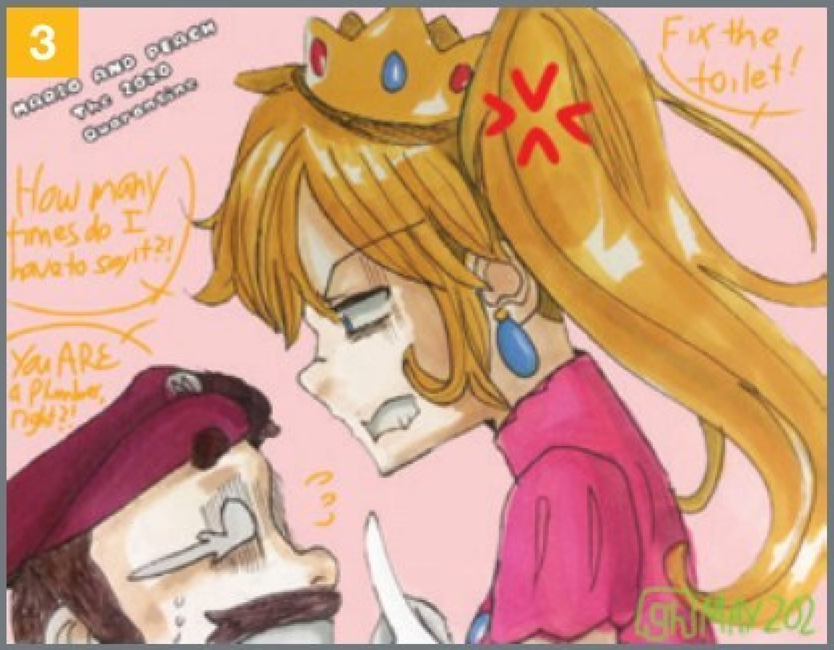
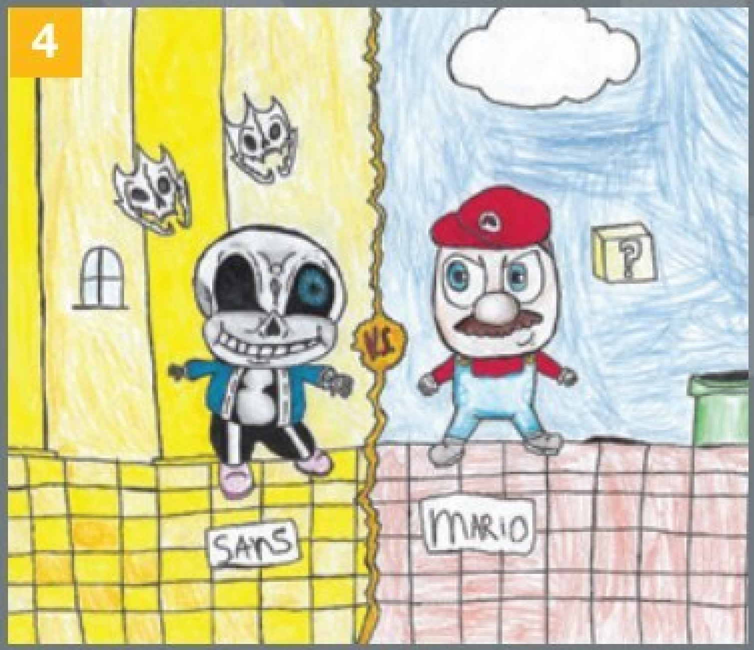

Mario and Peach
The 2020
Quarantine
How many times do I have to say it?!
You ARE a Plumber, right?!
Fix the toilet!

4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(Left) Chris Bourassa, Co-Founder, Red Hook Studios **(Center)** Tyler Sigman, Co-Founder, Red Hook Studios **(Right)** Kelly Kleider, Senior Technical Artist, Ubisoft San Francisco

INTRODUCING THE PLAYSTATION 5

Sony reveals the first look at its console and the games you'll be playing on it

J

June is traditionally the time for E3, which normally would have been the perfect opportunity for Sony to walk onstage at its showcase press conference with the PlayStation 5 in hand. Instead, the company debuted the system and many of its games via a video presentation. Despite this format, gamers still had their first look at the home console and got a sense of its design, even if important questions remain about its price and release date at the time of this writing.

The PlayStation 5 comes in two configurations – standard and digital (and both only in white). The only difference Sony is highlighting at the moment is that the digital edition does not have a disc drive for physical games. Of course, how this affects the price of the digital edition remains to be seen.

Both systems can be positioned vertically or horizontally, and so far it appears that due to the console's contoured outer shell, a stand is needed either to stand it up or lay it down on its side. Comparing the size of the disc slot on the standard edition of the PlayStation 5 with that of the Xbox Series X – an inexact comparison, to be fair – it appears that the PS5 is approximately a quarter taller than both the Xbox Series X and current Xbox One X. Microsoft has said the Xbox Series X is 151mm x 151mm x 301mm, which makes the Series X about a foot tall at its highest point. Using this same metric, the PS5 is about a quarter slimmer than the Series X.

Alongside the reveal of the two versions of the PlayStation 5, Sony also showed off a clutch of first-party accessories: the Pulse 3D wireless headset (with 3D audio support and dual noise-canceling microphones), an HD camera (featuring dual 1080p lenses), a media remote with a built-in microphone, and a charge station for two PS5 DualSense controllers. As with the system itself, price and availability for the accessories was not mentioned. Similarly, the broader question of whether PS4 accessories are compatible with the upcoming system is unknown. Sony has confirmed, however, that the PSVR headset does work with the PlayStation 5.

Sony's ersatz E3 presentation wasn't expected to answer all our questions about the PlayStation 5. Like Microsoft tried in May, this was more about trying to make a splash – an attempt to get gamers excited about what's coming by appealing to their hearts rather than their heads. To what extent that worked can be seen in the game previews of coming PlayStation 5 titles throughout this issue.

by Game Informer Staff

ation 5

STRAY

Stray transports you to a futuristic world where robots run the show, but you're not controlling one of them. Instead, you explore the decaying cybercity as a lost cat. You must defend yourself against dangerous threats and uncover the mysteries to this unwelcoming place, searching high and low to find clues, reach new areas, and most importantly, find your way home. Stray hits PS5 in 2021.

PRAGMATA

Capcom introduced this brand-new action/adventure IP with a mind-boggling trailer featuring a futuristic astronaut who stops a satellite from crashing into Times Square. We also see high-tech gadgets, a creepy young girl, and a holographic cat. We know Pragmata involves a dystopia on the moon, but this brief glimpse presents more questions than answers about the story. The game releases in 2022 on PS5, Xbox Series X, and PC.

ASTRO'S PLAYROOM

After starring in one of the PlayStation VR's must-play games, Astro Bot Rescue Mission, the bots are back in town. Astro's Playroom comes preloaded on every PlayStation 5 and delivers a series of tech demos and minigames meant to showcase the new capabilities and functions of the PS5 and its DualSense controller, similar to how The Playroom and The Playroom VR did for PS4 and PSVR respectively.

JETT: THE FAR SHORE

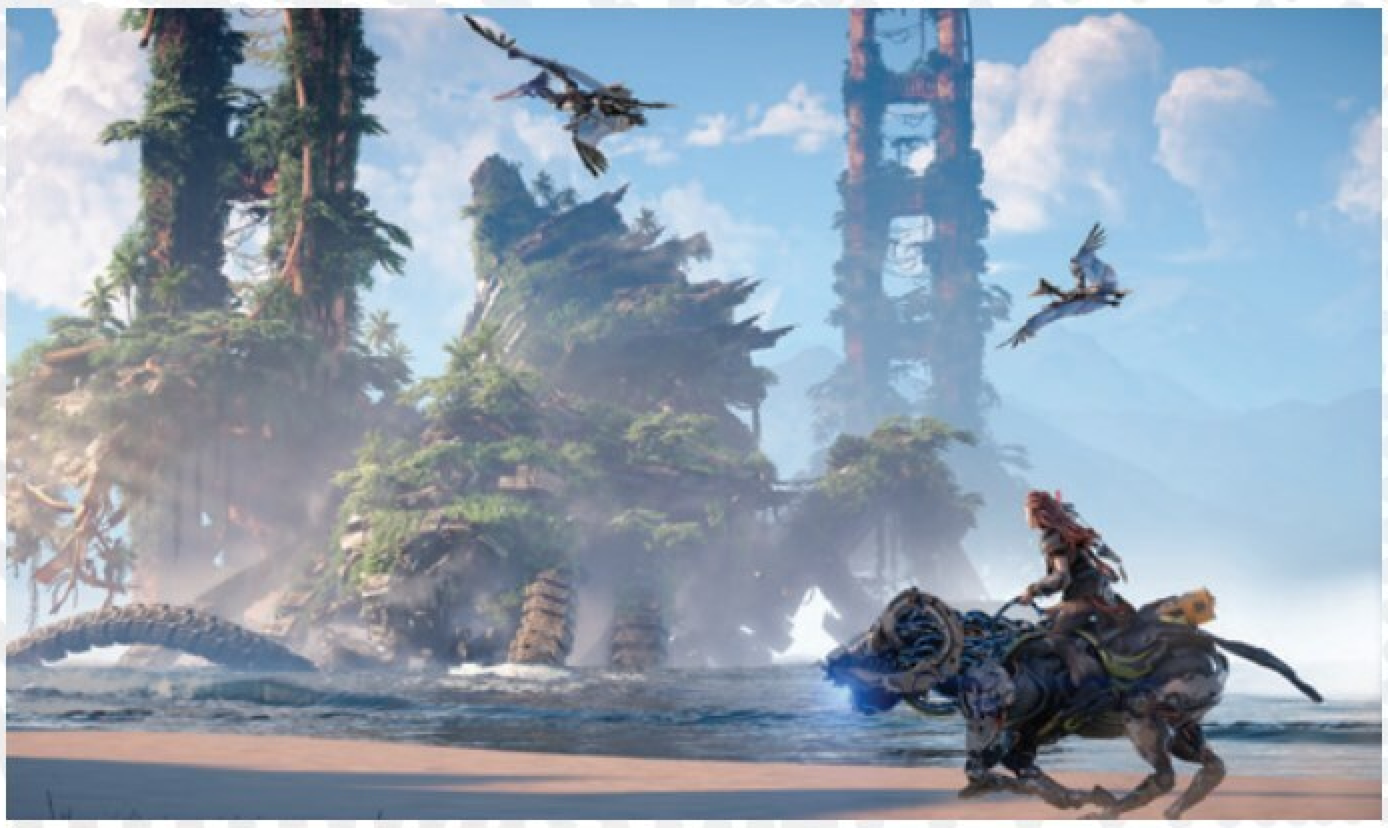
A "jett" is a unique craft used to scout unfamiliar planets, and you're the pilot. Explore a systemic open world and find a future for your people, all while experiencing a cinematic narrative adventure. Jett: The Far Shore is developed by Superbrothers (known for Swords & Sworcery) and Pine Scented Software, with music composed by Scntfc. You can chart the unknown when this interstellar adventure releases on PS5, PS4, and PC this holiday season.

LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE

The charming exterior of this debut title from Neostream hides an ambitious approach to survival, action, exploration, and RPG mechanics. You work for a professor studying unusual situations, and your job is to go on dangerous missions to hunt down creatures, and bring back artifacts. It's a surreal world, but rooted in the familiar. The game juxtaposes moments of intense danger with other scenes of everyday life. Watch for release on PS5, PC, Mac, and Linux.

HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

Guerrilla Games left the door open for a sequel to Horizon Zero Dawn, so much so it felt like a "when" instead of an "if." While fans may not be surprised to see Aloy return, Guerrilla Games still awed us with where her journey heads next. Forbidden West looks a little more aquatic, as we saw her exploring underwater ruins and beaches, in addition to the snowy mountaintops and sprawling landscapes we're accustomed to. The stunning visuals were the most impressive, as they panned in on Aloy coming face-to-face with everything from massive mechanical turtles to mythical Chinese dragons; even a massive robotic elephant shows up. Previously, we explored Utah and Colorado, but now we have shifted to the west coast, based on the game's title and the trailer showing off an area that reads "San Francisco" and what appears to be the Golden Gate Bridge. The trailer also confirmed the return of wandering researcher Sylens. With new dangers threatening everything Aloy has worked to protect, we can't wait to see how she'll rise to the occasion.



SPIDER-MAN: MILES MORALES

In the world of comic-book heroes, Miles Morales is a fairly new addition. The character debuted in one of Marvel's alternate universes in 2011, but proved so popular that he not only joined Marvel's main continuity but starred in his own film: *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*. This holiday, he'll be center stage in Insomniac's Spider-Man: Miles Morales. Not bad for a hero who's been around less than a decade.

Miles Morales isn't a traditional sequel, since it comes bundled with a remastered version of Insomniac's Spider-Man that takes full advantage of the PS5 hardware. Some have described Spider-Man: Miles Morales as an expansion, but we imagine that this project is similar to Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, which was built off of Uncharted 4's framework.

Whatever the case, Miles will have his own story and will make use of his venom-blast ability, a strike that temporarily paralyzes almost anyone it touches. We're still not sure how big the game will be, but Insomniac described it as a "standalone game," implying that fans can expect a meaty experience.

BUGSNAX

You really are what you eat in Young Horses' upcoming Bugsnax. The studio behind Octodad has created a colorful world filled with living snacks. As a new arrival on Snaktooth Island, you need to use your wits (and traps) to find all 100 different edible specimens, including ambulatory strawberries, French fries, doughnuts, and more. As your Muppet-like character chows down, they start to take on the appearance of the food, too. Yum?

GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

This narrative-centric adventure transports you to a cartoon world full of dinosaurs who are coming of age and confronting the challenges of growing up. When their graduation gets upstaged by a horrible event, how will they cope? Expect branching paths, multiple endings, and for your choices to directly shape the main character's identity and future when the game comes to PS5, PS4, and PC next year.

RETURNAL

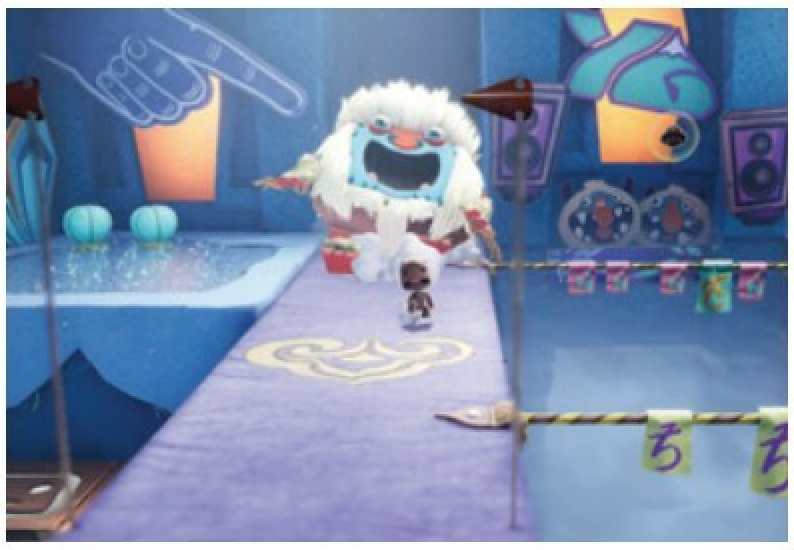
Housemarque is best known for its blistering arcade shooters like Resogun and Nex Machina, but the studio has consciously moved to other formats. Returnal appears to be the most ambitious effort in that new direction, telling the story of a lone astronaut who crashes on a strange planet, where her sanity is challenged by an endless loop of her own life and death. If the developer's talent for tight shooting gets an injection of equally high-concept sci-fi, this will be one worth watching.

DEATHLOOP

In this first-person shooter from Arkane Lyon (Dishonored, Prey), you visit an island that's considered a never-ending party … until you wake up hungover and hunted down by everyone on it over and over again. Take down eight targets and break the loop, but beware of a rival assassin, who can optionally be a PvP opponent, who is intent on stopping you. Deathloop looks to blend cool moves with the freedom of choice, and hits this holiday.

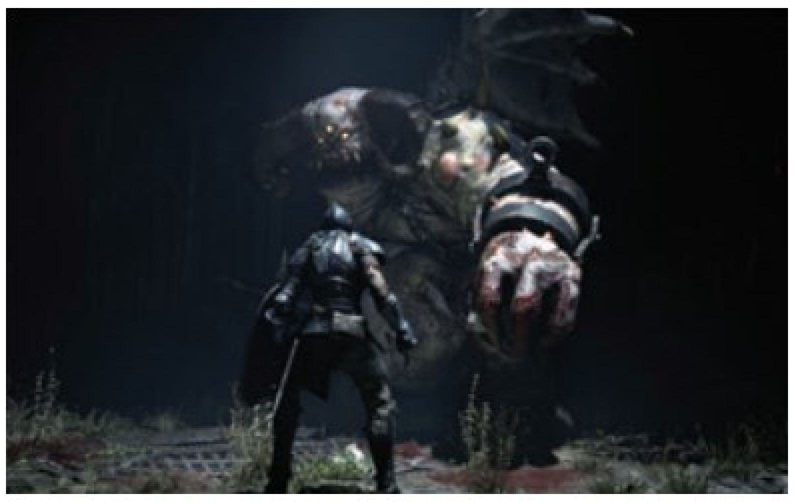
SACKBOY: A BIG ADVENTURE

LittleBigPlanet is back as Sumo Digital takes Sackboy on his next big adventure. Players can expect a colorful, chaotic platforming jaunt through a wide variety of environments as the iconic PlayStation character. You can go solo or team up with friends to traverse the weird, wild world. We don't have a release date yet, but the journey appears whimsical and lighthearted.



NBA 2K21

NBA 2K has stayed atop of the sports-game pack, and with a new console generation, it looks to continue its dominance. Pelicans power forward Zion Williamson starred in a trailer to showcase the visual enhancements, and they're stunning. From the smooth movement to dripping sweat, we're at a new level of realism. Visual Concepts also boasts "loading speeds of less than two seconds," for its fall release.



DEMON'S SOULS

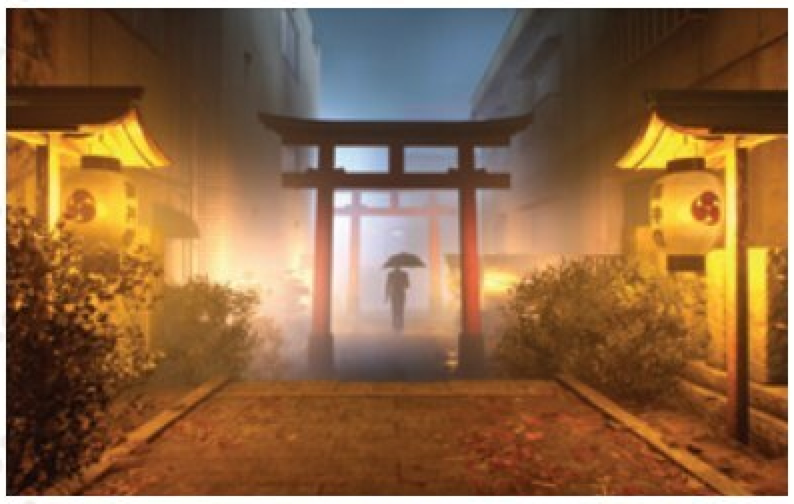
Demon's Souls kicked off the soulslike craze way back in 2009 on the PlayStation 3, but it wasn't really until Dark Souls that the challenging, dark, gritty From Software games gained mass appeal and recognition. From Software is not involved with this remake of the action-RPG; Bluepoint Games and Japan Studio are building things from the ground up. We don't know much about what, if anything, will change – but we do know what we've seen so far looks incredible.

DESTRUCTION ALLSTARS

Have you ever thought that Rocket League puts too much emphasis on the sport going on and not enough focus on destroying your opponents' vehicles? Destruction AllStars hopes to deliver the futuristic demolition derby of your dreams. By bringing colorful characters, intense vehicular combat, and vibrant arenas to do battle in, Destruction AllStars looks fast, flashy, and fun.

PROJECT ATHIA

Luminous Productions was the Square Enix team behind Final Fantasy XV, and now the studio is working on an adventure that follows a woman who explores a strange world with the aid of mystical abilities. *Rogue One* co-writer Gary Whitta led a team of other writers to help create the fiction for this expansive new universe. Though Square Enix says it is being "designed exclusively" for PS5, Project Athia (which is a working title) will also release on PC.

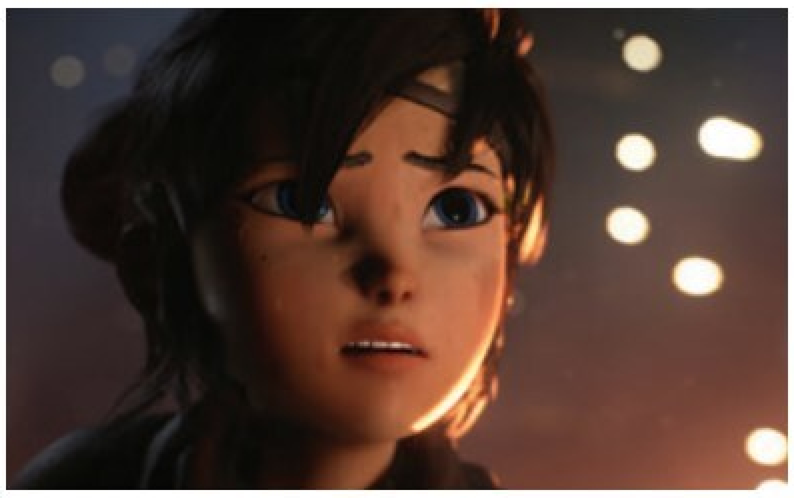


GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Tango Gameworks' first release since The Evil Within 2 is a supernatural horror game that drops players into an eerie version of Tokyo where 99 percent of the population has mysteriously disappeared, and hostile spirits from Japanese folklore have flooded the streets. In this first-person action game, you'll explore Japan's modern skyscrapers and ancient temples as you banish these creepy yōkai from the city. GhostWire: Tokyo is set to hit PS5 and PCs sometime in 2021.

KENA: BRIDGE OF SPIRITS

Ember Lab's first game, Kena: Bridge of Spirits, looks like a hybrid of a 3D Zelda adventure with critter-wrangling elements that evoke Pikmin – and we're not complaining. The new studio was formed by brothers and a small team who previously worked on film and animation. With charming visuals and potentially interesting puzzle-solving mechanics involving the heroine's spirit companions, we're excited about what we've seen so far.

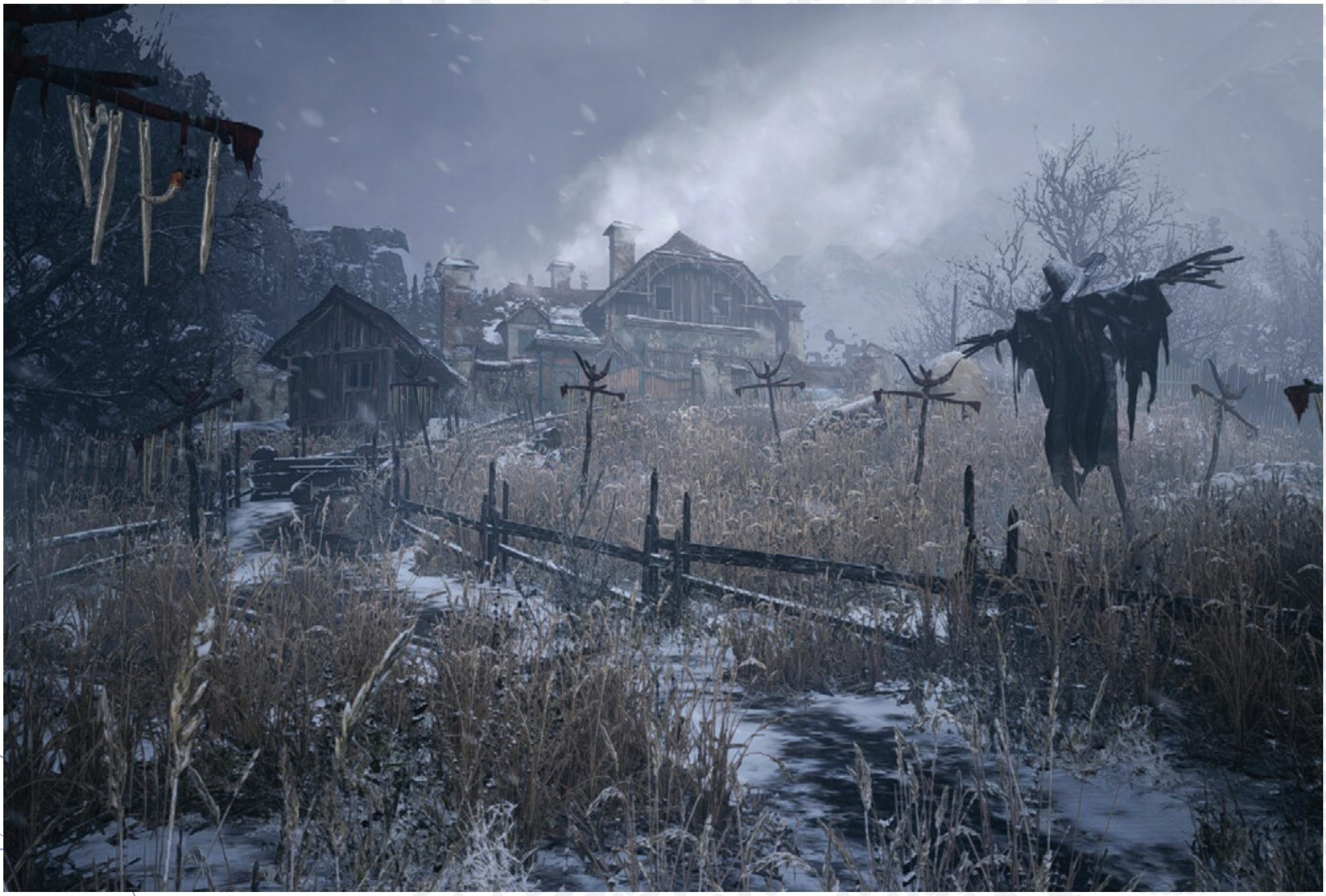


GRAN TURISMO 7

Developer Polyphony Digital is back in the driver's seat for Gran Turismo 7. Along with photorealistic graphics that are used to bring cars from the past and present to life, this sequel unfolds within Gran Turismo World, a place that gives players plenty of options between races, such as customizing cars, and traveling to different parts of the world to gain experience points and standing in those regions. No release date has been announced.

HITMAN III

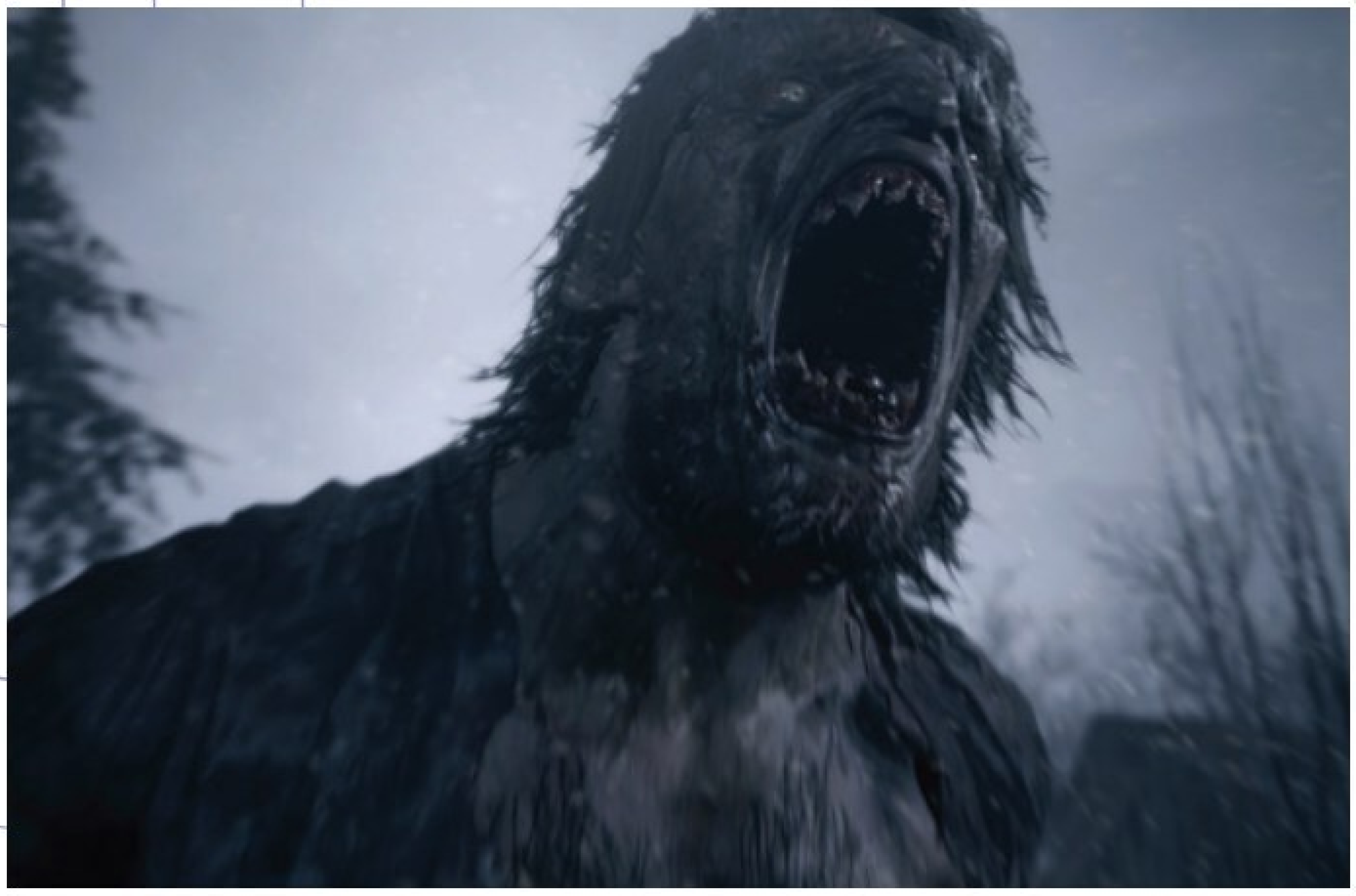
IO Interactive is prepping the final installment of its "World of Assassination" trilogy, and Agent 47's latest adventure looks pretty killer. The hunter's famed cool will be tested as he seeks to bring down the partners of Providence, aided by his ever-helpful handler, Diana Burnwood. Focused on player choice and replayability, the sandbox levels encourage experimentation and creativity. The game adds six new locations, including a breathtaking version of Dubai that includes some death-defying skyscraper scaling. However, it's the integration with previous games that's especially fascinating; all the locations that players own from previous installments can be imported into Hitman 3, so items and other progression elements acquired in one place carry over to all the others – effectively making the entire trilogy one giant assassination platform. In addition to PS5, you can also expect to find the game on Xbox Series X, PS4, Xbox One, and PC when it releases in January 2021.

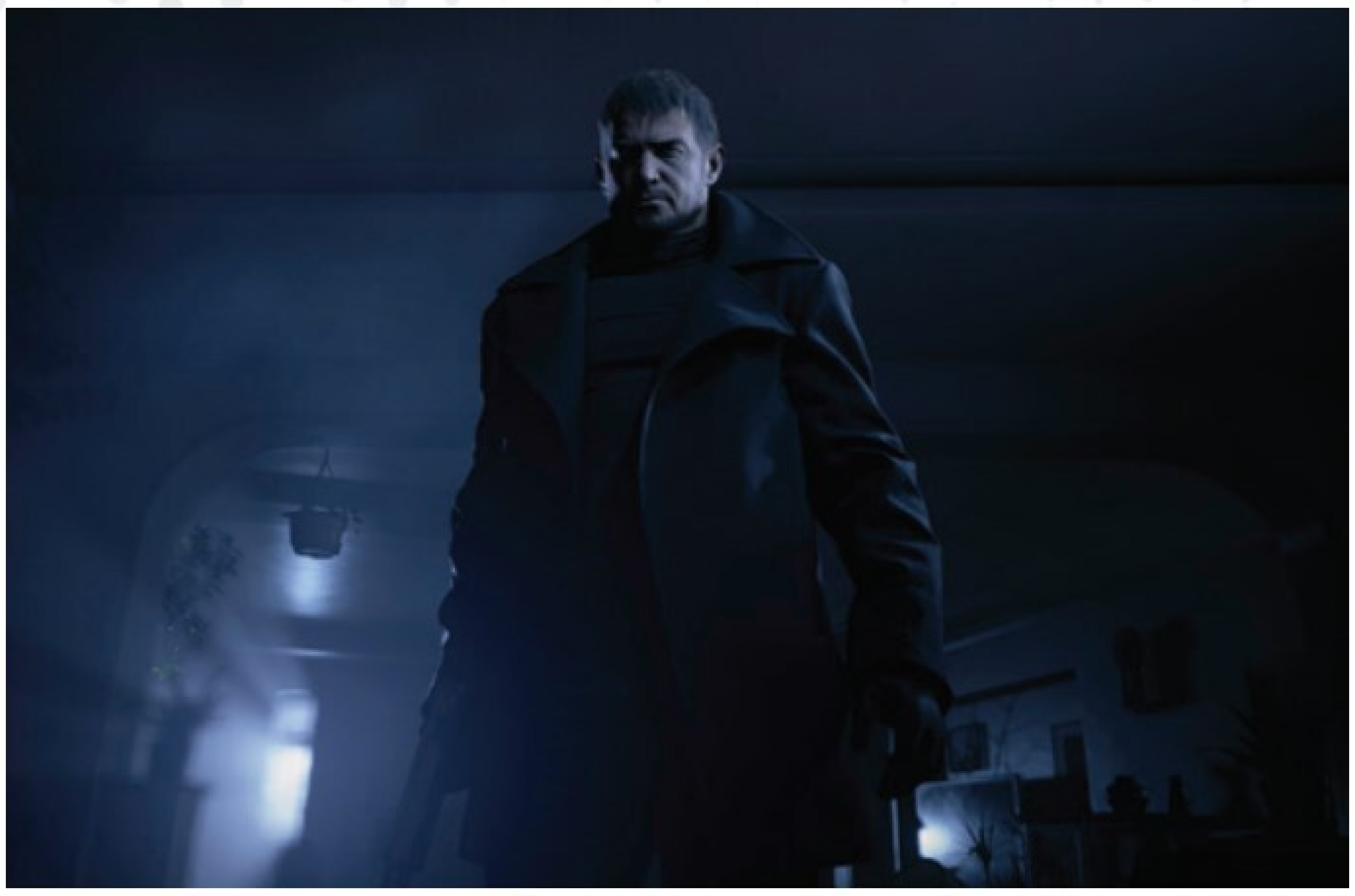


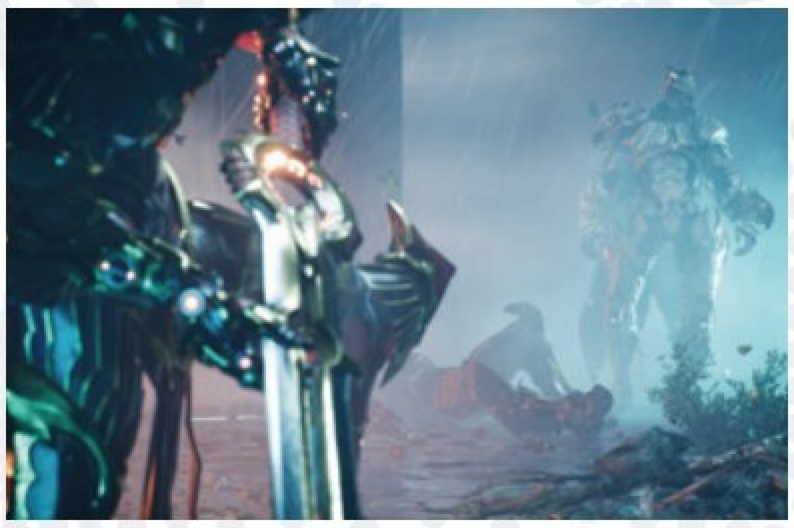
RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

After a couple of stellar remakes, Capcom is finally looking toward the future of the Resident Evil franchise with its eighth official entry. At the end of Resident Evil 7: Biohazard, protagonist Ethan Winters survived an ordeal with a cannibalistic family and reunited with his wife, Mia. Village picks up that story where it left off. Ethan and Mia have moved to a small, secluded village hoping to put their past behind them. However, when Resident Evil mainstay Chris Redfield shows up and murders Mia, he sends Ethan down a series of tragic events that turn into a horrifying, new nightmare.

While we suspect that not everything is as it seems in Resident Evil Village's reveal trailer, we do know that the game continues the first-person gameplay established in Resident Evil 7. Ethan will again contend with a series of horrors as he solves puzzles and collects a new arsenal of tools. We didn't see any zombies during Village's reveal, but it was full of other unnerving monstrosities. Capcom has clearly been inspired by the modern folk-horror genre seen in films like *The Wicker Man* and *Midsommar*, so expect to be terrified.







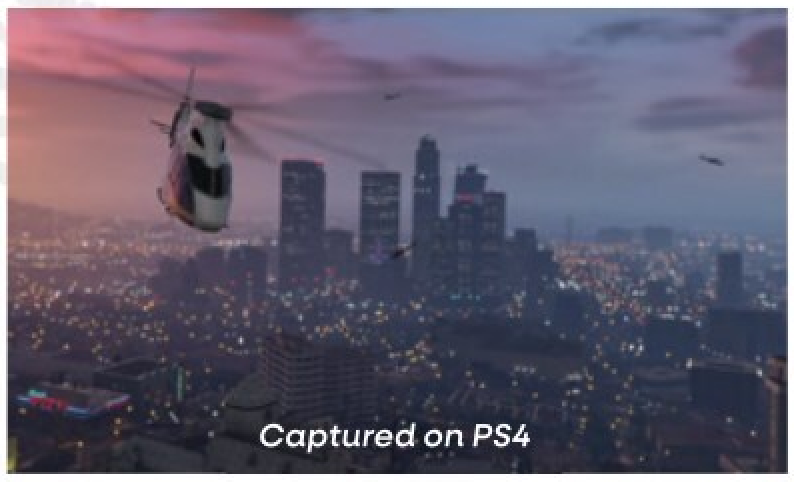
GODFALL

If the concept of a looter-shooter has become passé, perhaps Godfall's looter-slasher may fit the bill. This action-RPG, developed by Counterplay Games and published by Gearbox, features heavily armed and armored characters who battle for new godly gear. Up to three players can team up on their way to fight the mad god Macros, mastering five weapon classes and suiting up with 12 zodiac-themed armor sets along the way.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V, GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE

Grand Theft Auto V and its online companion have been a massive success over the past two console generations, and it's not slowing down anytime soon. Rockstar announced that the games are coming to next-gen consoles, including PlayStation 5, in the second half of 2021. The company wasn't talking specifics (or showing footage of that project), but expect visual and performance upgrades.

Captured on PS4



Captured on PS4

ODDWORLD: SOULSTORM

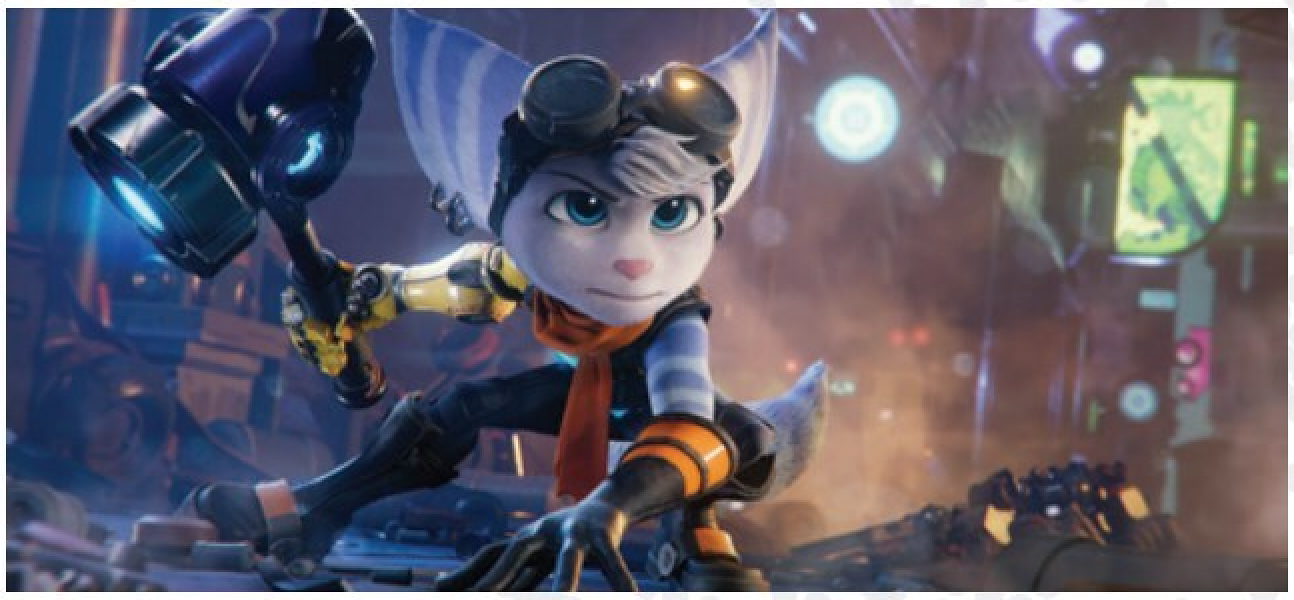
We've known for some time about Oddworld Inhabitants' new adventure for Abe, but it's exciting to learn that the title is headed to PS5, alongside previously announced platforms of PS4, Xbox One, and PC. Soulstorm is a new take on Abe's later adventures, branching the story in the direction the creators originally intended. Gameplay focuses on Abe leading very large groups of Mudokons to freedom in real-time. And it looks like not everyone is going to make it out.

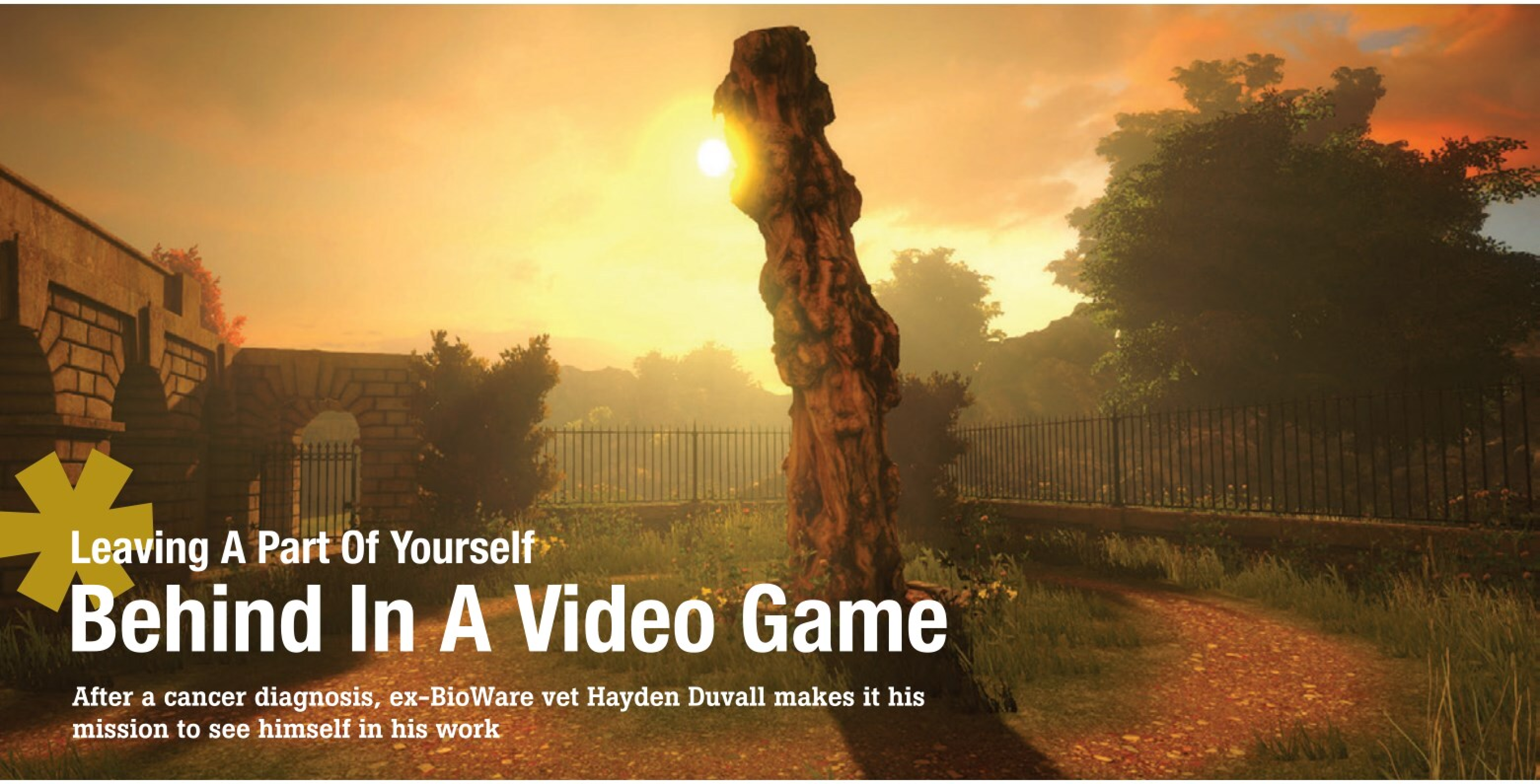
SOLAR ASH

Remember Hyper Light Drifter? The beloved indie darling's creators at Heart Machine are back, and making a game that looks quite similar so far – except it's in 3D! A mysterious world that's oozing its own special style invites players to explore as they take on gigantic, imposing foes. Annapurna Interactive is publishing this strange adventure, and we can't wait to see more.

RATCHET & CLANK: A RIFT APART

The rodent and robot duo is back in another adventure created by Insomniac Games. Using the speed provided by the PlayStation 5's SSD, the game instantly loads new environments as rifts in space and time are opened. One second you are in a jungle, the next you are in a city – both equally as detailed and with no load times separating them. Rift Apart also impresses visually with giant creatures lumbering about and little details everywhere. ◆





Leaving A Part Of Yourself

Behind In A Video Game

After a cancer diagnosis, ex-BioWare vet Hayden Duvall makes it his mission to see himself in his work

Hayden Duvall has spent the last few decades building a storied career in the video game industry. He's worked on everything from cutscenes to animation, before finally settling in as an artist at big-name studios like 3D Realms and BioWare. But Duvall's career has been full of highs and lows. As a big Duke Nukem 3D fan, he was excited to work on the franchise, but then watched as the game (which became Duke Nukem Forever) went through development hell without even a release date. He then landed the coveted role of art director at BioWare, a company he admired and respected, only to see his first big projects canceled. However, nothing could prepare him for the turn his life took when he discovered he had a rare form of blood cancer: myeloma. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

Confronting Uncertainty

It started with back issues, which anyone who sits at a desk for long periods deals with. Duvall didn't think much about it. He had been working on a now-canceled project at BioWare codenamed Agent, which was the studio's take on the secret-agent lifestyle; Duvall said it took inspiration from the James Bond and Jason Bourne films. "BioWare had the reputation that really could have worked well in that type of genre, where you're playing a role of a super spy, and you're building your team and the other things that you do generally in an RPG in a different setting. So, it was quite exciting," Duvall recalls.

As Duvall continued working on the project, the back pain continued, but then things took a strange turn when he started to lose the use of his legs. Duvall described it as, "they just started to stop working," leading him to an emergency-room visit, where an MRI revealed a tumor in his spine. Duvall was left to wait and see what the tests would reveal about his fate.

"I was in this strange limbo, considering the worst-case scenario, which probably everybody does," Duvall says. "Then, looking back on the years of what I've done professionally, I came to the realization that in my career, which was around 15 years, I'd only ever worked on other people's stuff. I'd been a facilitator of other people's ideas. And that's totally normal. The vast majority of people in the games industry do that, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I thought if I didn't have a chance, if things were bad and that was all I could do, there'd be nothing left of me in a slightly morbid sense."

He then asked himself a simple question: If he survived, what did he really want to be doing? That day, Duvall put himself on a new path. "I started to think, 'What is the route that I need to take to get to a position where I'm able to develop something that feels personal to me and reflects me in some sense that I can ... feel?" He knew he couldn't just start a new company overnight, and he didn't have the resources to hire a group of developers. Instead, he spent the next several years learning to program. Thankfully, Unity appeared around the same time, giving him a way to see his vision come to life. "It was the early days [of] Unity back then, obviously now it's a big deal," Duvall says. "But it was a system that allowed you to potentially create things yourself if you were able to learn the skills, and I saw that as a way to be able to independently create something."

During this time, Agent would end up a casualty in BioWare's merger with EA, who preferred the studio to focus on its big-name franchises: Mass Effect and Dragon Age. "We worked on that for quite a long time," Duvall

says. “Ultimately, after the sale to EA, [there was] an inevitable evolution of the studio’s priorities and resources. They canceled it, which was a horrible tragedy for us who were working on it.” But Duvall didn’t let that stop his desire to work. Heck, he didn’t even let cancer stop his desire.

Between radiation treatments, Duvall headed back to work at BioWare, who he said was very accommodating and set him up to work from home, on a part-time basis. “As soon as I was able to, I got wheeled back into work in a wheelchair and slowly came back to full fitness.” Sadly, around the same time Duvall was getting back to normal, his next project, which was a heist game where you played as super thieves (codenamed Javelin), was canceled. “You’d assemble a team and try to plan heists and pull off robberies in museums,” Duvall says. “It seemed like an interesting angle for BioWare to go in contrast to their space and their fantasy, but ultimately the plug was pulled.” From there, Duvall helped on the studio’s flagship Mass Effect and Dragon Age series, with Anthem being the last project before he finally left the studio after 11 years. It was finally time to take the plunge and make his own game.

Are Old Gods Rising?

Duvall had spent his spare time learning the basics to make a game solo. This meant he would do everything: art, programming, design, and writing. Duvall named his one-man studio Bad Blood, a nod to his cancer, and got to work. When he first sat down to brew ideas for the game, he went back to when he was first diagnosed with cancer. “One of my main goals [was] to feel like the game, in as many ways as reasonably possible, reflected me as a person. That somebody who knew me and played that game would recognize me in its tone and its content,” he says, joking that’s not to be taken literally, since there’s no physical representation of him in the game.

Old Gods Rising is a first-person adventure game where you play as Thomas Winston, a professor of ancient history, who has recently fallen on hard times as his latest book is under fire for being based on fraudulent evidence. “I find it more interesting when characters are not coming from a position of power, but instead from a position of weakness,” Duvall says. Thomas then gets asked to be a consultant on a movie by a big-shot director. Thomas reluctantly takes the job, but when he arrives, things are not what they seem. Is the director, who has done hidden camera films in the past, playing a trick on him? Or is there something more sinister going on? That’s for you to find out as you explore and examine artifacts around the university, deciphering clues about its ancient origins.

Duvall is from the UK and wanted a setting he was familiar with, so he chose to set the game at a fictional English university. “Most everything in the game is linked to me in some way, whether it’s pictures of my kids, you know, stuff that’s obvious to someone who knows me. But also, throughout the university, there’s lots of sculptures that are scattered around and each one of them represents a game, or a film, or some book, or something that has had some meaning to me over the years.”

He also felt like a university was the perfect venue to explore one of his favorite plot devices, playing around with what is real and what isn’t. “Rather than your straight-up space opera or your high fantasy, I always found myself drawn to those things that were seated in the modern world ... but also had some elements of something else,” Duvall explains. “[Having] the reader, or the viewer or the person playing the games, evolving and kind of questioning things and trying to decide exactly what they believed and what is [actually] real.” Duvall uses the example of *The Matrix*, where you have two realities and some interplay between them, but a lot is left up to the audience to decipher. He also was inspired by the non-horror elements of H.P. Lovecraft and how he delved into “the absolute crazy end of what could exist in this universe, but poked into the mundane.”

In the end, it’s all up for your interpretation, which will be influenced by what you uncover. “Hopefully, as things are played through, the player is pulled in directions that will have them reconsider what they think,” Duvall says. “It will depend on who they speak to, what they see, and what they believe they’re seeing. At the end, they make up their mind about what actually happened.”

Old Gods Rising is now out on PC, and Duvall’s cancer treatment has been successful at keeping things in remission. Still, there is no cure, and Duvall goes for tests every few months to make sure it’s at bay; he remains optimistic about the future. “The level of treatments for a lot of cancers, and blood cancers in particular, are improving dramatically as they advance in certain types of gene therapies and stuff like that,” he explains. “Research has come a long way in the last 10 years, so I don’t feel like I’m living my life under a cloud of eventual collapse.” For now, he’s just glad that when he looks back on his career, he has something that reflects part of him back.

JACK IN NOW!

Games to play as you wait for Cyberpunk 2077

by Andrew Reiner

In 1983, Amazing Stories published a short story by Bruce Bethke called Cyberpunk. This tale's vision and name gave birth to the cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction, which has become a popular theme for video games. From the System Shock titles to Hideo Kojima's Snatcher, almost every gaming generation is backed by a great cyberpunk game. As you count down the days until Cyberpunk 2077's release, you may want to dive into a cyberpunk world beforehand to get a taste of what's coming. Here are seven other cyberpunk games that will feed that appetite.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS

Platforms: PC • Mac • iOS • Android

The Shadowrun IP has an uneven history; it wowed Super Nintendo and Genesis players in the 1990s, and disappointed Xbox 360 players in 2007 with a lackluster reboot. Developer Harebrained Schemes brought the franchise back from obscurity with Shadowrun Returns, a wonderful turn-based strategy RPG that celebrates player freedom in combat and character customization. The game's science-fiction-fueled corporate-espionage tale is told like a hard-boiled detective novel. You can even create your own content using the deep editor.

DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

Platforms: Xbox One • PC • Mac

Originally released on last-generation consoles, Deus Ex: Human Revolution can now be played on Xbox One through backwards compatibility and is still available to download on PC and Mac. Human Revolution blends stealth, gunplay, and tech in ways that embrace player freedom, allowing objectives to be completed in a number of ways. Character progression is handled exceptionally well, as is the story, which has a fantastic payoff at the end.

赤龍賭場
Red Dragon Casino

RED STRINGS CLUB

Platforms: Switch • PC • Mac

What would a world be like if no one had any negative thoughts? This idea is explored in a cyberpunk story that unfolds through the eyes of three characters: a bartender, an android, and a freelance hacker. Each viewpoint explores what it means to be human in a controlled world. The gameplay mostly consists of conversations and manipulating people's wills through a variety of minigames. The action may come up a little short, but the story wins out in a big way and is gripping from start to finish.

TRANSISTOR

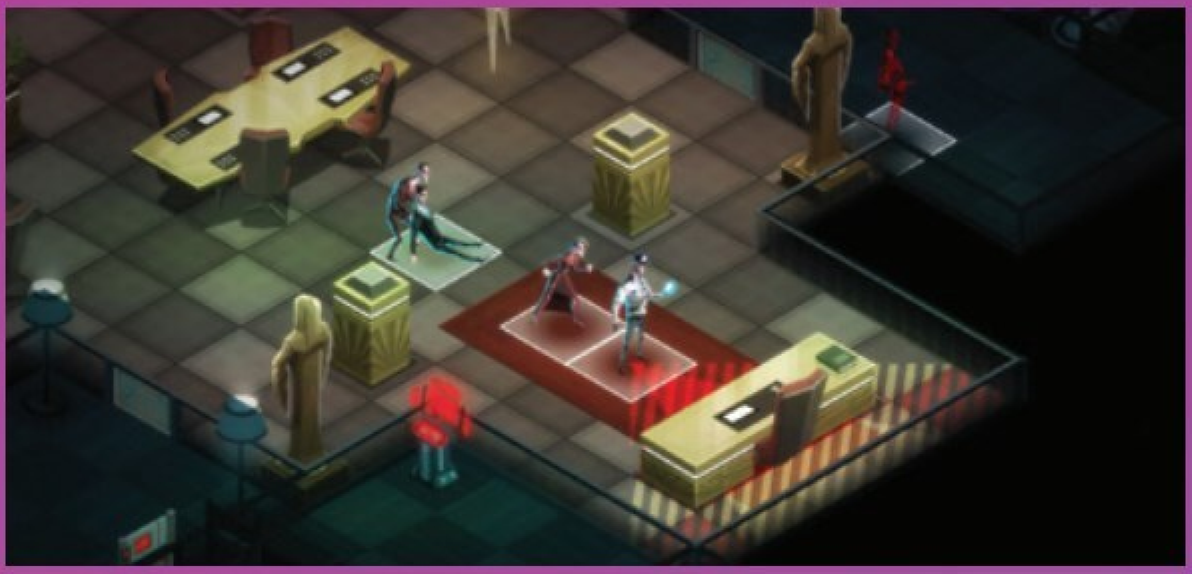
Platforms: PS4 • Switch • PC Mac • iOS

You are Red, a former songstress who has lost her voice and now relies on a talking sword to guide her through the dangerous streets of Cloudbank. Through a tactical combat system, you are tasked with defeating a robot army controlled by corrupt city officials. Transistor is wild and weird (with an exceptional soundtrack), and a great follow-up to developer Supergiant's excellent Bastion.

OBSERVER

Platforms: PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC • Mac

Set within a run-down apartment complex called "the Stacks," Observer weaves in horror themes as much as science fiction. It's filled with jump scares and terrifying visuals that unfold through first-person gameplay and a great story about the dangers of body augmentation and the toll economic hardship can take. You also hear it unfold through the voice work of the late Rutger Hauer, who does a wonderful job of bringing you closer to this troubling world.



5 KO
100% to hit
6 KO
20% critical

INVISIBLE, INC.

Platforms: PS4 • PC • Mac

This stylish turn-based strategy game has a unique hook: You don't have to fight everyone. In fact, you are rewarded for avoiding conflicts as you infiltrate, hack, and loot corrupt corporations. The missions hold a lot of variety, and success brings a wealth of tech to experiment with and use to quietly dismantle fat-cat empires.

TECHNOBABYLON

Platforms: PC • iOS

Drawing inspiration from the point-and-click adventure games of yesteryear, Technobabylon tells the story of a society that no longer seeks human interaction, and is ruled by an A.I. that sees and suppresses any uprising. A conspiracy unfolds through the eyes of three different characters with wildly different viewpoints of the world. A strong narrative and fun puzzles make Technobabylon a must-play for cyberpunk fans. ◆

EIGHT EASY QUESTIONS WITH THE ECCENTRIC YOKO TARO

The Nier creator isn't afraid to say what he thinks, especially when it comes to his love for alcohol and money

by Kimberley Wallace

As the mastermind behind the Drakengard and Nier series, Yoko Taro confronts dark themes in his work, especially when it comes to death and why people kill. His unconventional approach to game design has won him fanfare and accolades, but Taro's refreshing honesty and interesting views have also catapulted him to a status of cult favorite. While Yoko Taro likes to keep you guessing about his next move, we do know that starting July 1, a mobile game he worked on called SINoALICE is finally reaching a North American audience. SINoALICE, which Yoko wrote the story for, has characters from fairy tales trying to revive their author. The twist? To get that accomplished, they must take each other's lives. Expect large real-time battles, gacha mechanics, and the traditional (or is that untraditional?) Yoko Taro-ness. Read on to find out what you're in store for.

How did you come up with the idea for SINoALICE's story, and how would you compare it to your previous work?
I think of stories while I drink beer. Compared to other titles, I think maybe the amount of beer has increased.

What made you choose to use fairy-tale women as the main characters? What about the idea that they were stories lent itself to what you wanted to do with this game?
Supposedly we chose female characters because they'd make more money for gacha. Regarding fairy tales, I thought it would be nice because the copyrights have expired and it wouldn't cost money.

You've talked about how you feel games are too entrenched in their own genres, and how you end up trying to break games out of those molds. Did SINoALICE represent an opportunity for you to do that with mobile games?
I couldn't break out of the mobile-game mold. I feel pained by my powerlessness.

Why are so many of your stories about characters who are defined by their relationships to their creators?
Every person depends on others. Even if you feel like you're on your own when you grow up, we all have that childishness in our hearts, and feel like we want to be protected. The interdependent relationships between the authors and characters mirror that situation. ... I just thought of this randomly, but it's a pretty sound answer, right?

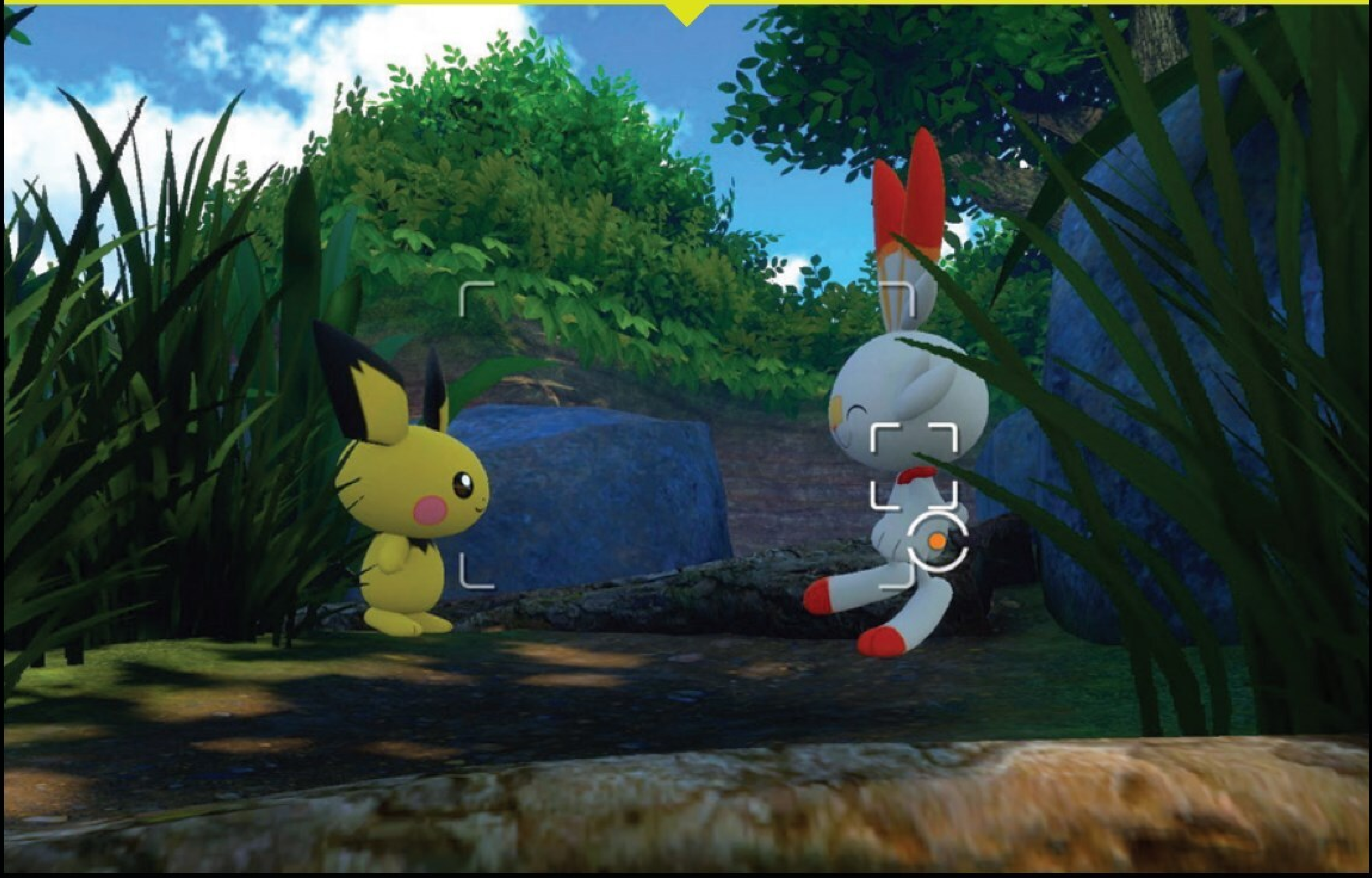
Your games tend to linger on the violence and death they depict such that the player can't help but critically ruminate on them as they play. Why do you want your players to think about the kinds of death they're participating in or even experiencing in your game?
I always reflect real life in the characters that appear in the world of SINoALICE. We're covered in greed and have the dirtiest thoughts in our minds that we could never share, but pretend to be good people – I think that's so interesting, and that's how the stories turned out to be dark and violent.

How has your life changed with COVID-19? What have you been up to since it happened?
Yoko has never liked to see people, so he typically stayed at home and drank. Since there are less chances to have meetings outside, Yoko Taro began drinking even more, his health began to fail, and he passed away. He was a good guy, what a pity.

What games have you been playing right now?
I'm playing Deus Ex Go. This is a good game, but I like Lara Croft Go better, which I played a little while ago. I'm impressed by this team. Maybe Square Enix could go crazy and make "Nier Go"?

What message would you like to give your fans during this time?
Life has ups and downs. It's hard to go out these days, but let's have some beer together sometime. See you later.

The Good



POKÉMON SNAP is coming to the Switch, two decades after the series debuted on the N64. No release date or timeframe has been announced as of the time of this writing, but Bandai Namco is developing the title, and it's filled with cute and colorful critters – with new expressions and behaviors – to put in your Photodex.

The Bad

AT&T, owner of Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, is reportedly looking to sell the gaming division – including its subsidiary studios, including Rocksteady Studios (Batman), NetherRealm Studios (Mortal Kombat), TT Games (Lego), and others. At the time of this writing, heavy-hitters Take-Two, Electronic Arts, and Activision were all interested. We'll have to wait and see how it all shakes out for WBIE, its studios, and franchises, and hopefully a sale doesn't negatively shake up the studios and series Warner Bros. has built through the years.

The Ugly

Former Riot Games (Valorant and League of Legends) global head of consumer products, **RON JOHNSON**, resigned from the company after Vice Games found a Facebook post from Johnson critical of George Floyd, who was killed by a Minneapolis police officer in May. The developer promptly put Johnson on leave and started an internal investigation. Johnson resigned the next day. The culture at Riot Games itself has already come under criticism for being hostile to women, and the company settled a class-action gender-discrimination lawsuit in 2019. ◆

Quotable

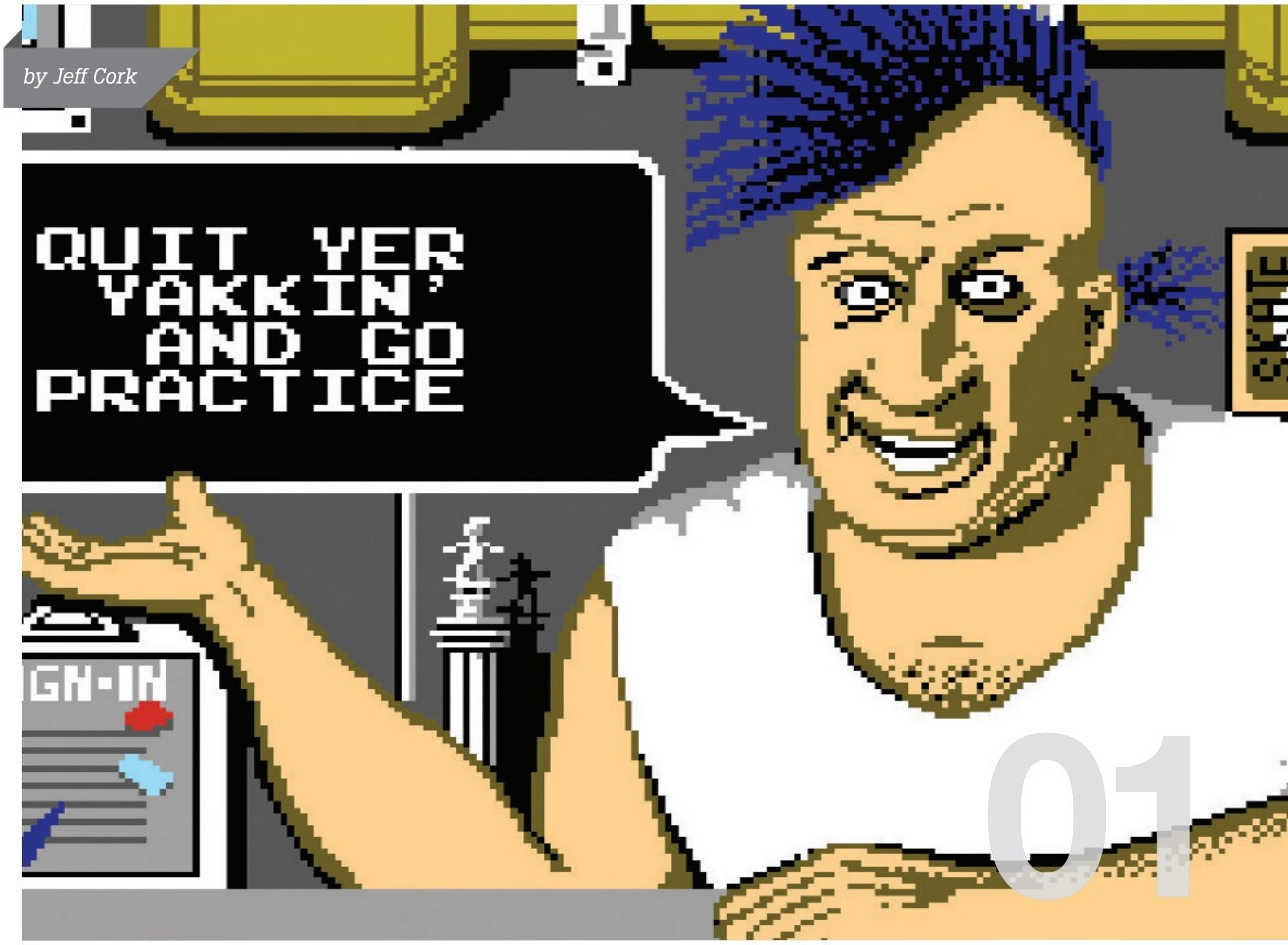
"The next thing could be a Part III, the next thing could be some new IP."

Neil Druckmann, The Last of Us Part II writer/director in an **interview with magazine** GQ.

Photo: William Tung

PUNKS

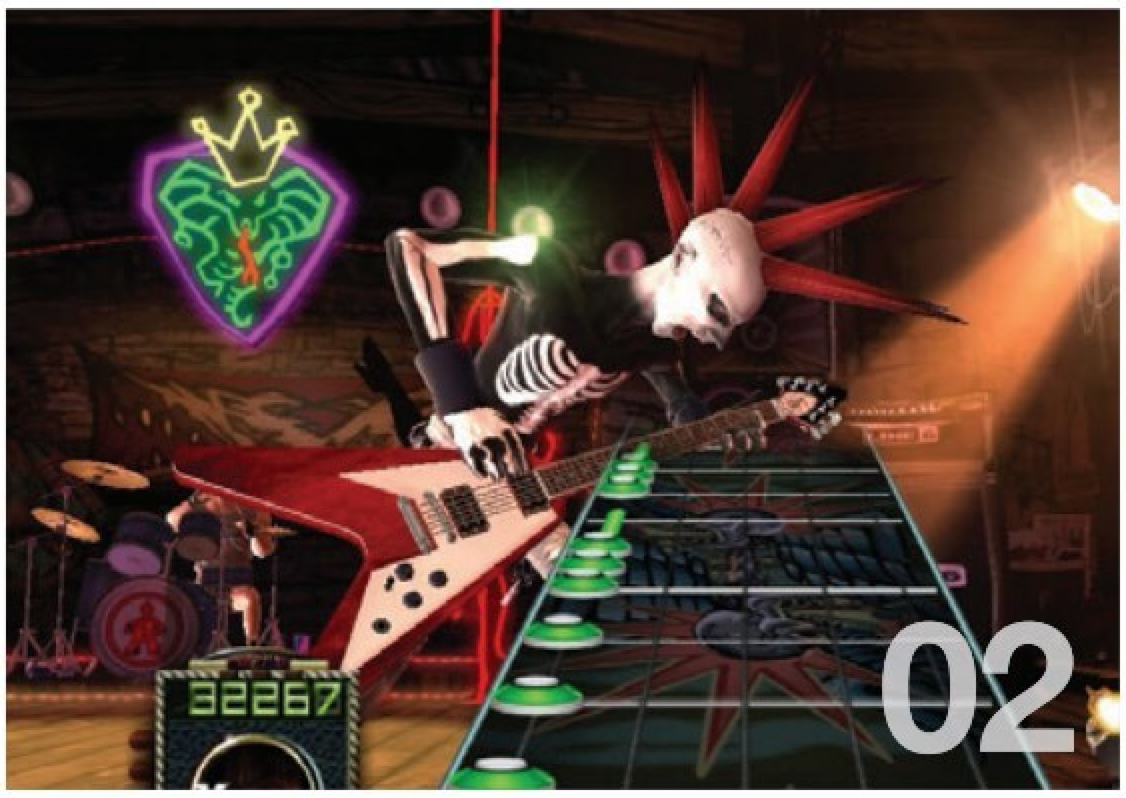
by Jeff Cork



Rodney Recloose

Skate Or Die!

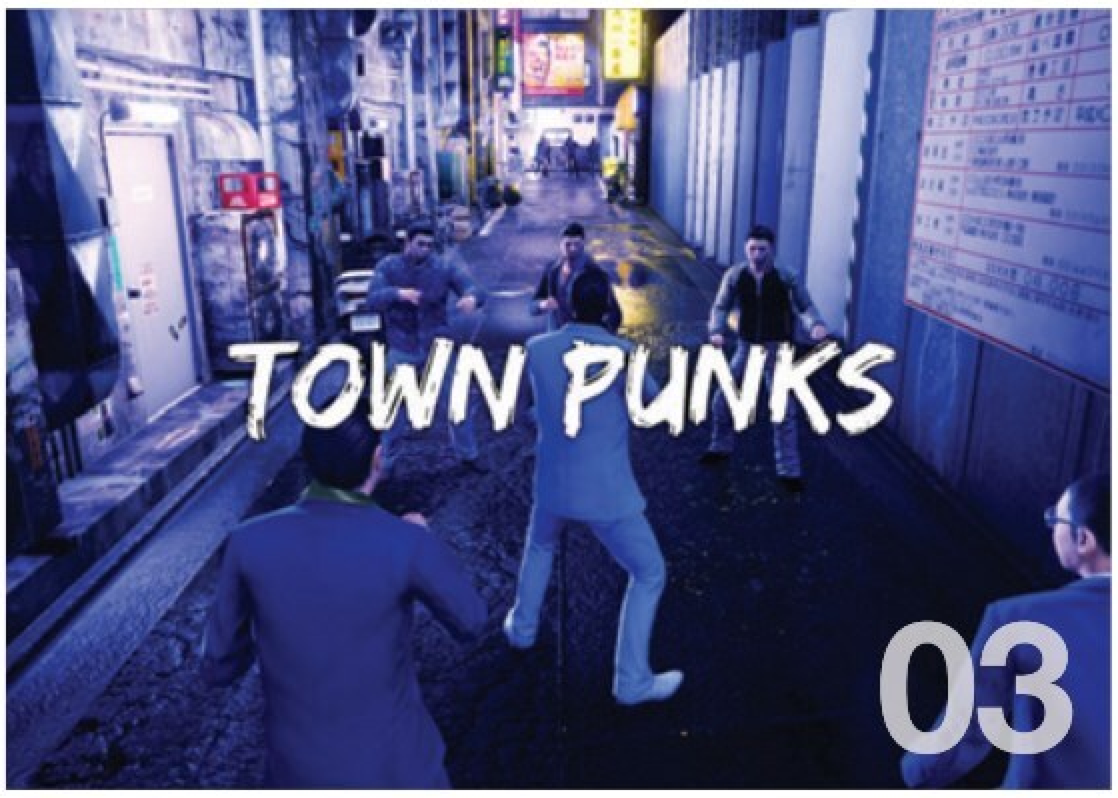
This skate-shop owner proved that punk's not dead – it's just getting a little older. Rodney kept his freak flag flying while he kept track of high scores. We're certain that any resemblance between this mohawk-sporting middle-ager and a certain Mr. Dangerfield were completely coincidental. No respect!



Johnny Napalm

Guitar Hero Series

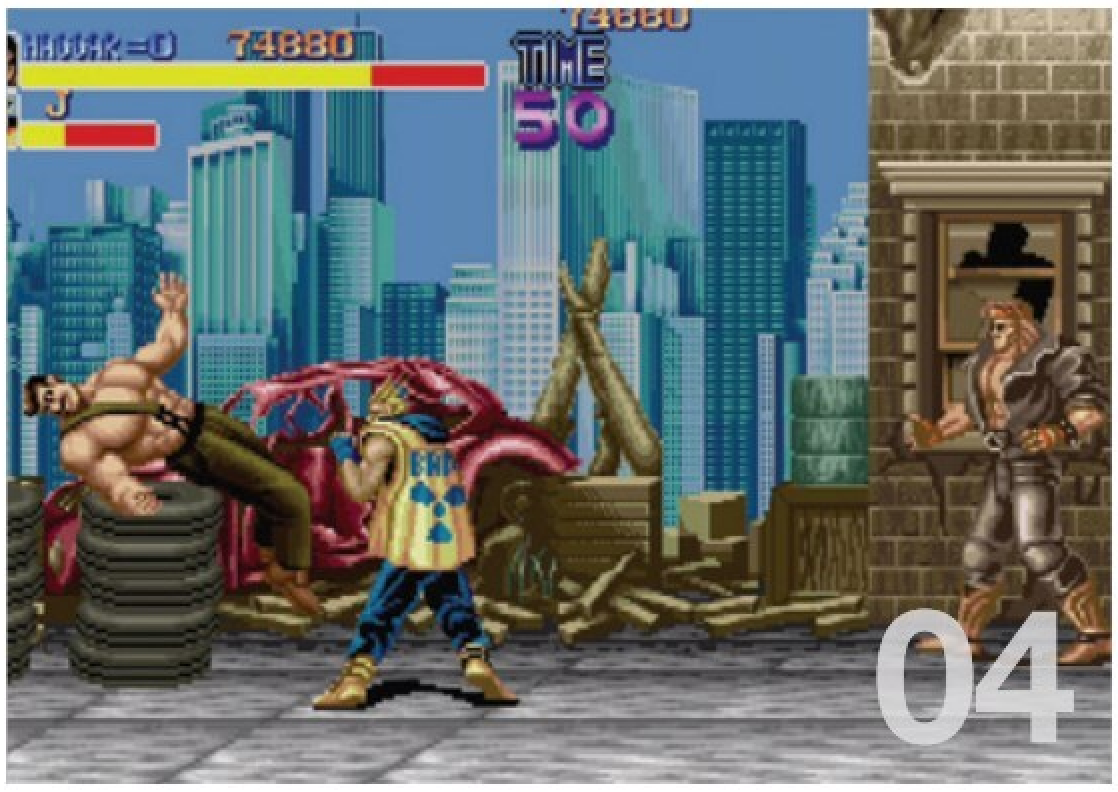
Johnny stomped his way across the stage and snarled along to the beat, regardless of what music was actually playing. His imposing haircut and in-your-face swagger could even make Warrant's "Cherry Pie" seem dangerous. He may have been on the cover of the first game, but don't call him a sellout!



Various Punks

Yakuza Series

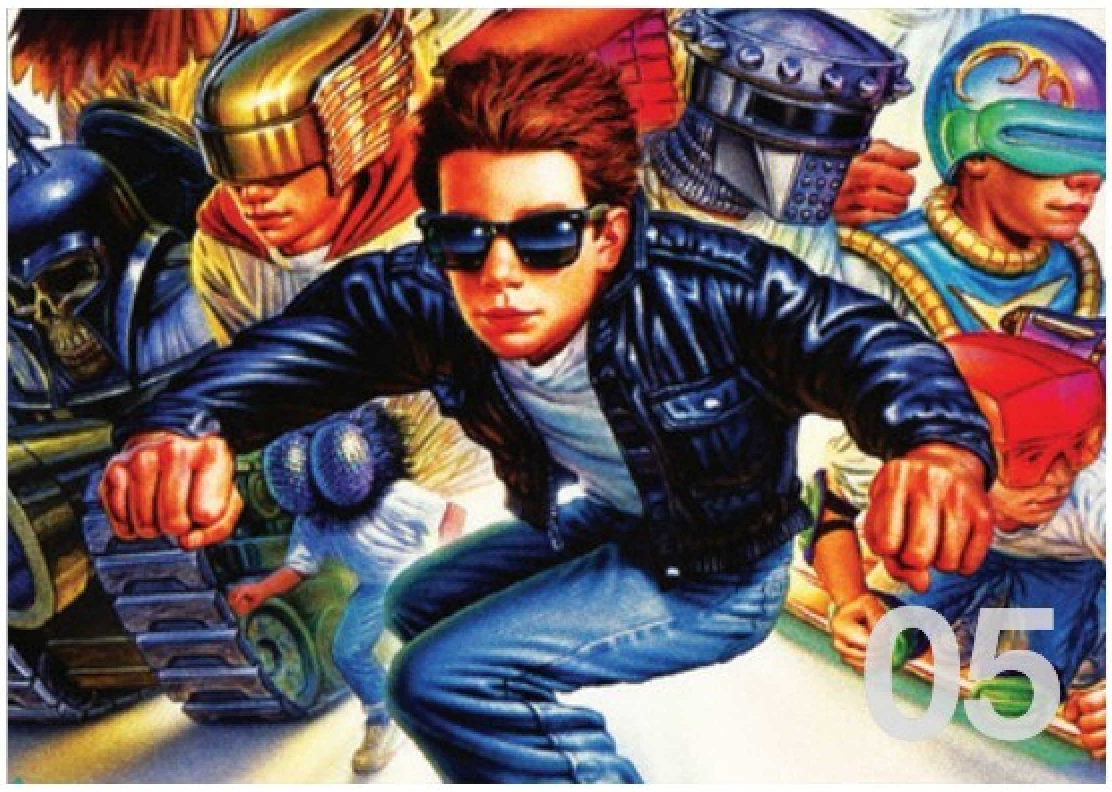
Kazuma Kiryu's saga spans seven entries set in a variety of fictionalized Japanese cities, but there's one constant: These streets are filled with punks! Some are mobsters, others are delinquents, but they all risk epic beatdowns by crossing paths with the Dragon of Dojima. You punks could have walked away …



The Whole Lot Of 'Em

Final Fight

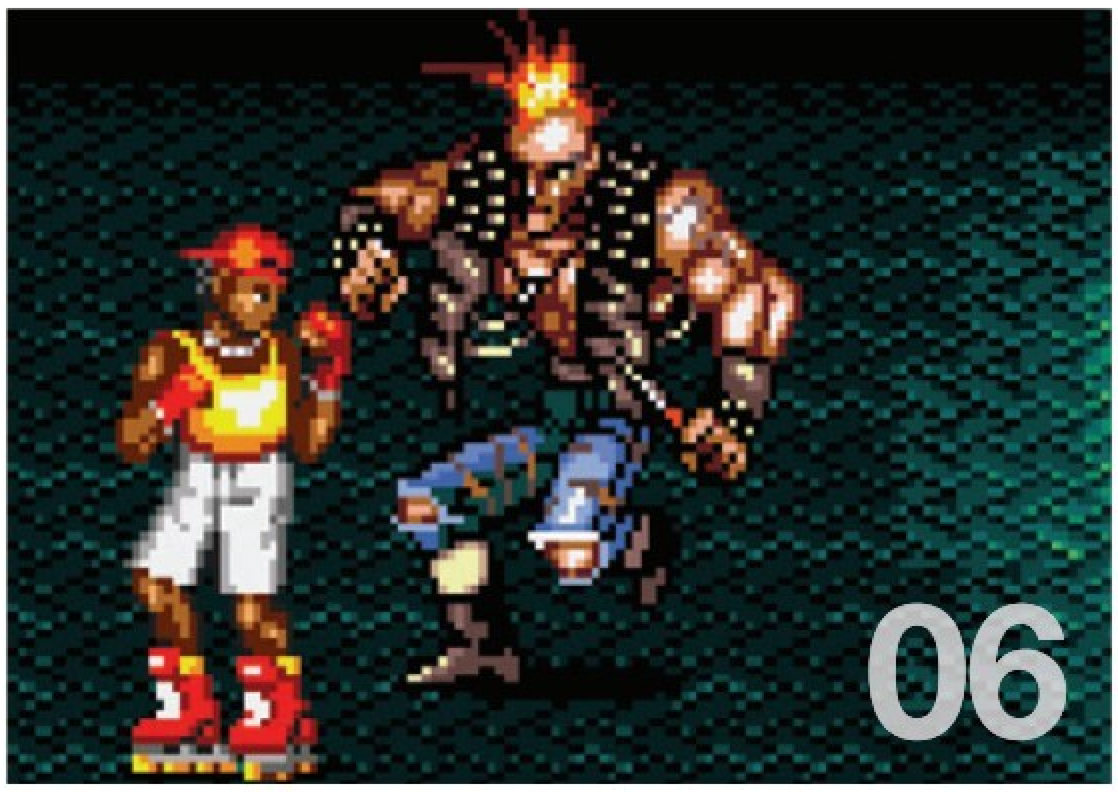
One look at mayor Mike Haggar is enough to clue you in that Metro City isn't an ordinary municipality. Literally everyone that you encounter in Capcom's beat-'em-up is a punk of one kind or another, including two memorable members of the Mad Gear gang, J and Two.P. If you don't think these guys mean business, take a look at their jackets. Does the word "Bad" change your mind?



The Titular Kid

Kid Chameleon

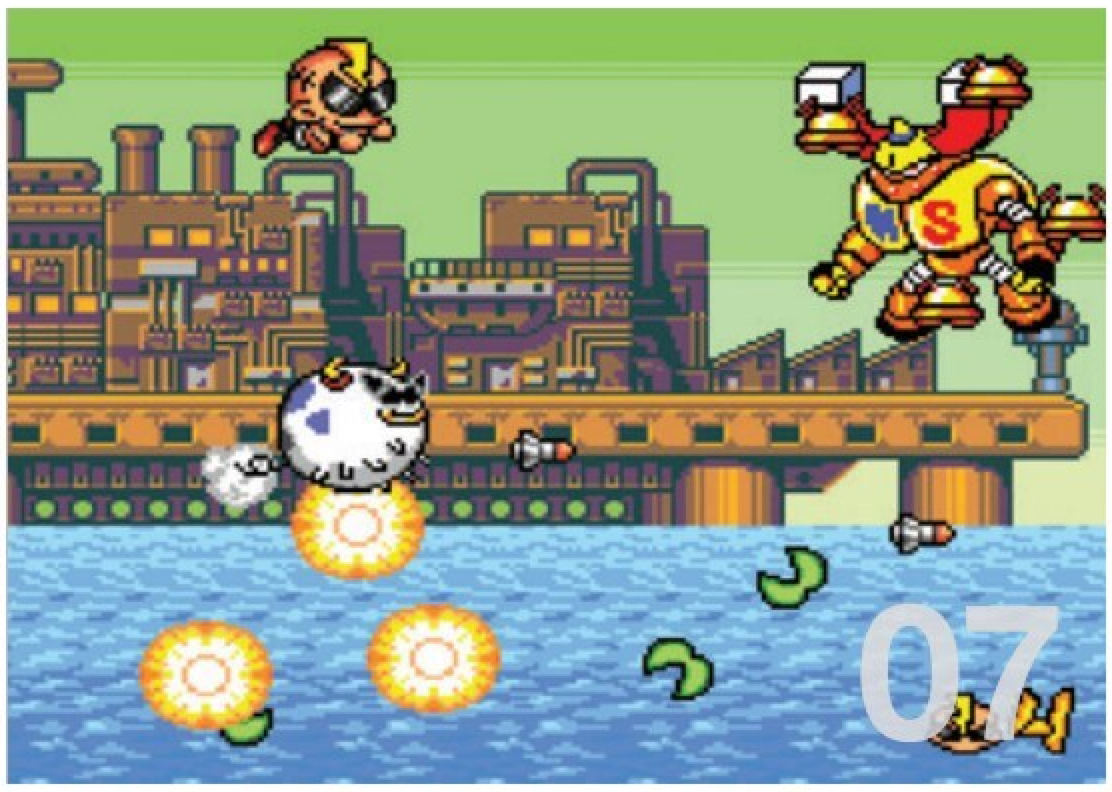
This is more of a "Get off our lawn, you little punk!" entry, but our point stands. With his black shades, leather jacket, and '90s-appropriate 'tude, this shape-shifting character couldn't get out of his default form fast enough. Even considering his ability to transform into a samurai or skull-shooting tank, this kid is a straight-up punk. Get outta here!



Jack

Streets Of Rage 2

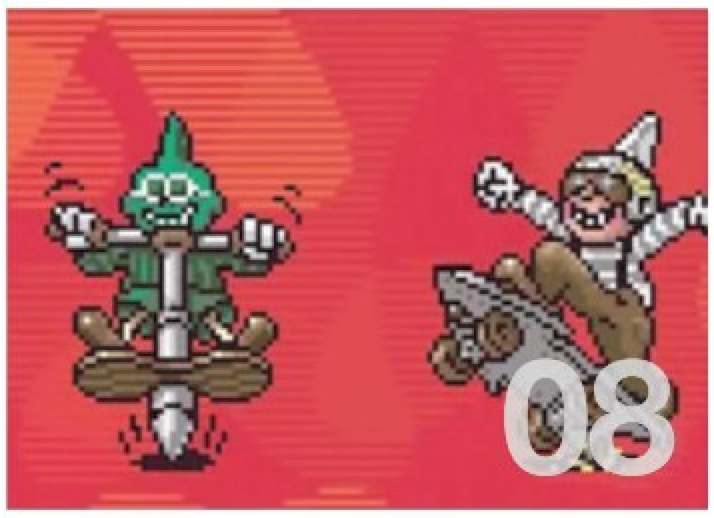
With his spiked leather jacket, mohawk, and generally menacing persona, this mid-boss would have been right at home slam-dancing his way through a mosh pit. Unfortunately, he's more interested in throwing knives and making your life miserable. If you want to completely humiliate this punk, beat him with the roller-blade wearing teen Eddie "Skate" Hunter.



Zonk

Air Zonk

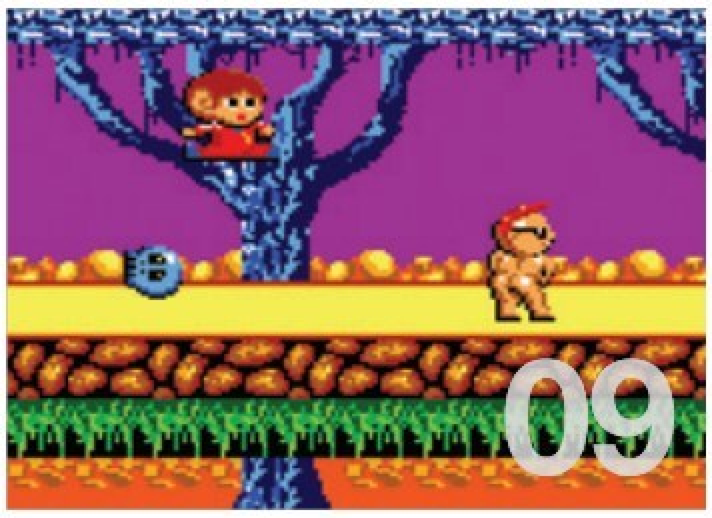
This cyborg is a distant relative of fellow TurboGrafx-16 cohort Bonk. Zonk trades his caveman ancestor's grounded platforming for arcade shooter-ing, transforming into a variety of bizarre forms. Imagine if Astro Boy (or Kid Chameleon) had a phase where he suddenly became very cool, and you're on the right track.



Pogo & Skate Punk

EarthBound

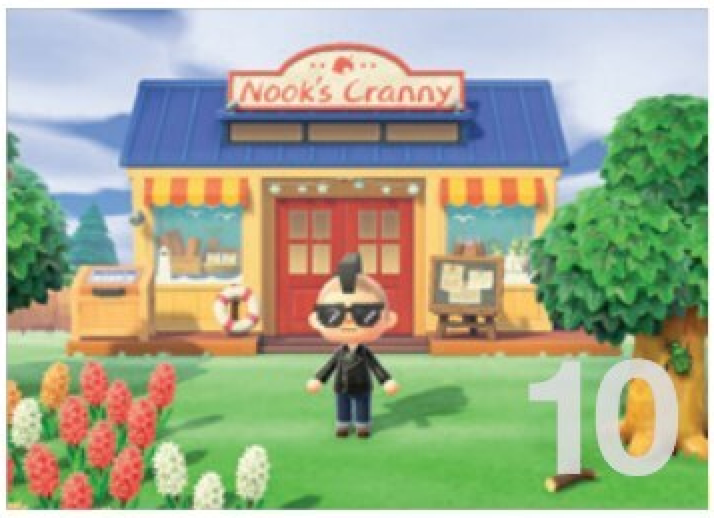
An alien invasion isn't the only problem that Onett residents face in this Super Nintendo RPG. The streets are also being terrorized by a gang known as The Sharks. If that's not scary enough, its members include the pogo-stick-riding Pogo Punk and a skateboarding punk known as (here it comes) Skate Punk. Okay, on second thought, maybe these punks are punks in several senses of the word.



Anonymous Skull-Pooping Punk

Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars

Surprisingly enough, Kid Chameleon wasn't the first punk who got the idea of shooting skulls. This Alex Kidd enemy did it first, firing projectiles from, well, his tushy turret. It really doesn't get much more punk rock than that. The fact we remember him more than 30 years later says it all.



You

Any Game With A Character Creator

When it comes to player-selected haircuts in video games, there are two options: mohawks and everything else. When you want to stick it to the establishment and thumb your nose at social norms, however, there's only one real option. This thin strip of head lawn tells the world that you don't follow the rules without having to say a single word.

CYBERTECH

A collection of neon-soaked gear for your high-tech lifestyle

by Ben Reeves

1

arasaka
Y
X
B
A
[RIG] XT7 PRO
NO FUTURE

1 Limited Edition Cyberpunk 2077 Xbox Wireless Controller

As the lead singer of the legendary chrome rock band Samurai, Johnny Silverhand has some serious style (so much so that they hired Keanu Reeves to play the character). This limited-edition Xbox Wireless controller was inspired by Silverhand's design and even features his tech-enhanced insignia. It might be the closest you'll ever get to holding Keanu Reeves in your hands.

$74.99 | xbox.com

2 SteelSeries Cyberpunk 2077 Headset Collection

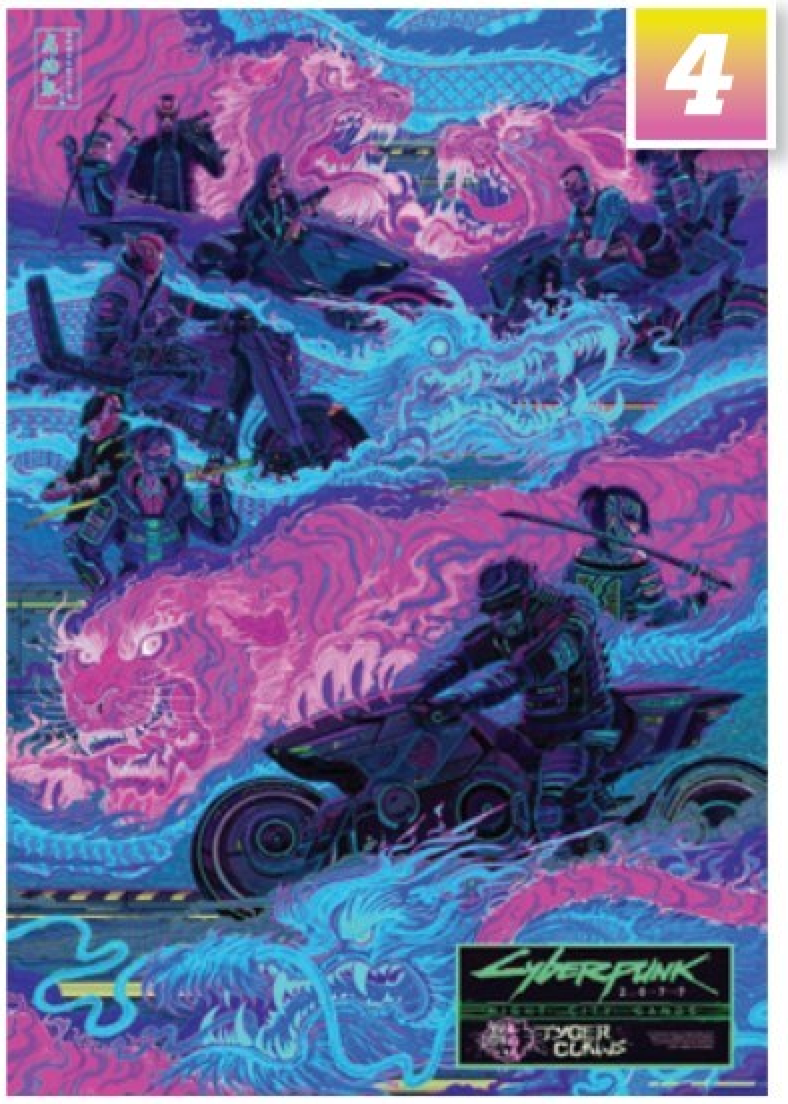
Augment your dumb organic ears with a state-of-the-art headset that allows you to hear even the smallest details. SteelSeries has a whole collection of Cyberpunk 2077 themed sets, but we lean toward the Arctis 1, which was inspired by the game's ability to let you see The Net overlaid on in-game objects and offers ultra-low latency lossless wireless for PS4, PC, Switch, and Android.

$109 | steelseries.com

3 Q-Workshop Cyberpunk Red Essential Dice Set

If you're going to challenge evil, monolithic corporations then you need the best tools you can find. In a pen-and-paper RPG, your best tools are your dice. This set of six dice is themed after the classic Cyberpunk Red RPG, and each side features its own distinct look.

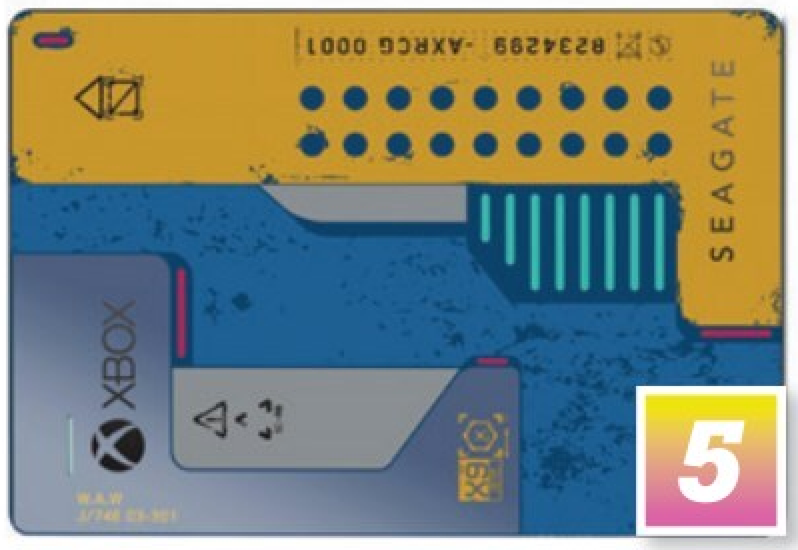
$17.00 | q-workshop.com



4 Night City Gangs: Tyger Claws Poster

Night City is home to a host of rival gangs, but the psychedelic vibe of Japantown's Tyger Claws has completely disarmed us. This vibrant Cyberpunk 2077 poster measures 38.5-inches by 26.5-inches and has the option to come framed.

$30.00 | us.store.cdprojektred.com



5 Xbox One Cyberpunk 2077 Special Edition Game Drive

Most external drives are so embarrassing we go to great lengths to hide them, but this Cyberpunk-themed hard drive from Seagate is so rad we'll happily give it a place of honor on our entertainment center. This portable plug-and-play drive comes pre-installed with Xbox firmware for a seamless experience.

$109 (2TB), $179 (5TB) | seagate.com

Media Shelf

ALTERED CARBON
TRANSMETROPOLITAN
CYBERPUNK

ALTERED CARBON BY RICHARD K. MORGAN

By the 25th century, humanity has spread across the galaxy and figured out how to download a person's consciousness into a new body. But when ex-U.N. envoy Takeshi Kovacs's consciousness is downloaded into a nicotine-addicted thug, he is drawn into a conspiracy that reaches the upper echelons of society.

$16.00
richardkmorgan.com

TRANSMETROPOLITAN BOOK ONE BY WARREN ELLIS AND DARICK ROBERTSON

The future looks grim, but that isn't going to stop reporter Spider Jerusalem from writing about it. Set in a dystopian city full of transhumanists, puppet governments, and controlling corporations, this award-winning comic is also a cutting commentary on modern society.

$19.99
dccomics.com

THE WORLD OF CYBERPUNK 2077 HARDCOVER BY MARCIN BATYLDA

This is more than just an art book, it's an extensive exploration of the lore of Cyberpunk 2077's world and a place to learn the important historical details about all of Night City's neon-tinted districts. But yes, it's also full of amazing art.

$39.99
darkhorse.com

GAMING ACTION FIGURES

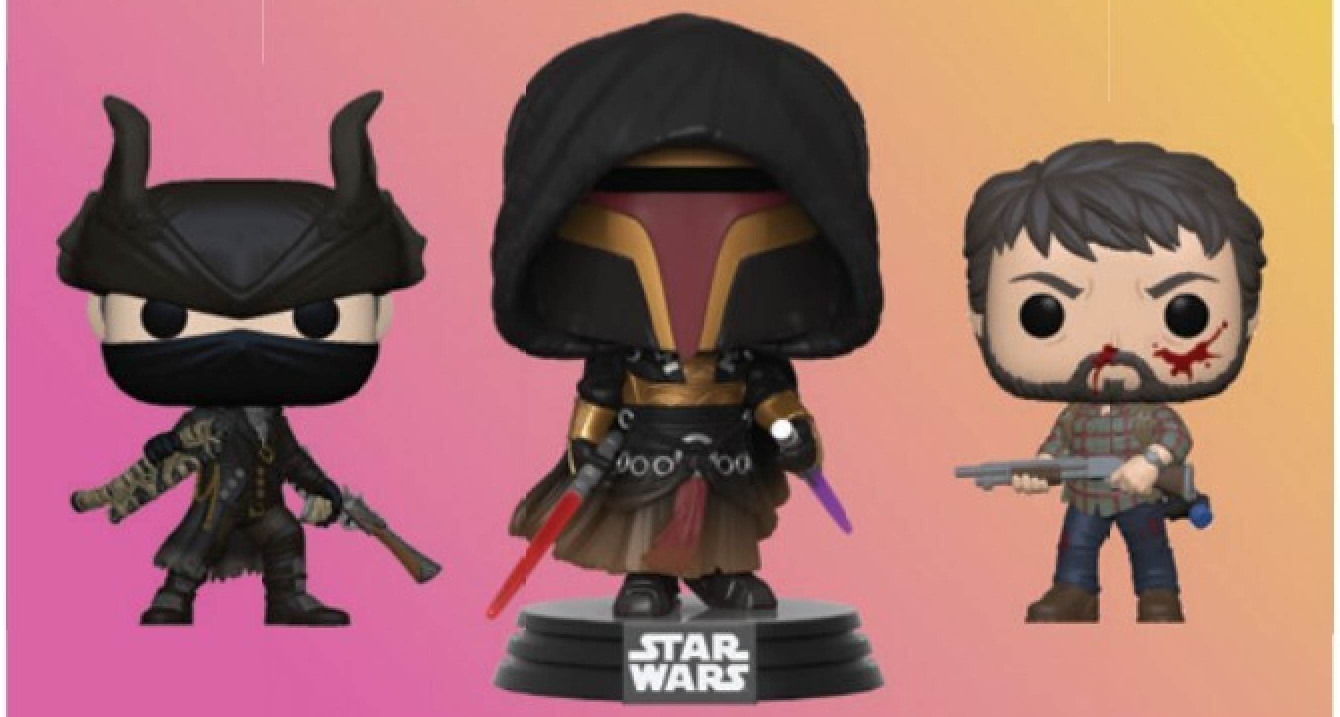
by Andrew Reiner

1

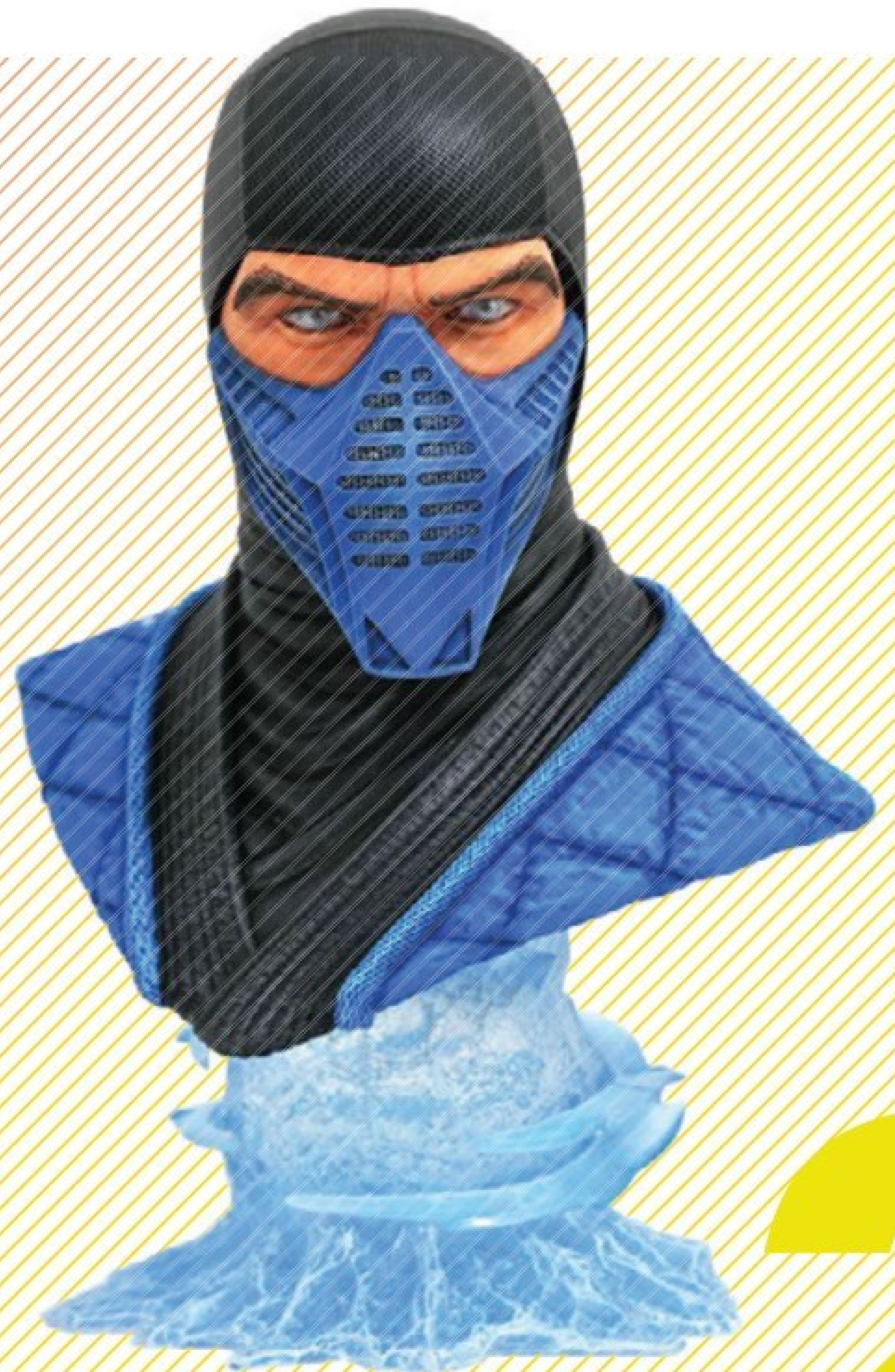
FUNKO PLAYSTATION AND STAR WARS POPS

The latest lines of video game-inspired Funko Pops feature prominent characters from Star Wars and various PlayStation-exclusive games. The Star Wars line consists of awesome sculpts of KOTOR's Darth Revan and Darth Malak. This series is rounded out with two figures from Star Wars Battlefront: a new hooded Yoda Pop, as well as a Shadow Trooper. The PlayStation line includes Joel from The Last of Us, The Hunter from Bloodborne, Jin Sakai from Ghost of Tsushima, and Kratos from God of War, who has glowing blades. Preorders are open now, with the release set for July 20 for the Star Wars figures, and August 18 for the PlayStation series.

$11.99 each | gamestop.com*



*Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of Game Informer



2

MORTAL KOMBAT SUB-ZERO BUST

No matter where you are sitting in your gaming room, the steely gaze of Sub-Zero will follow you. This 10-inch bust of one of Mortal Kombat's legends sits on a transparent ice pedestal. Only 1,000 of this item are being made.

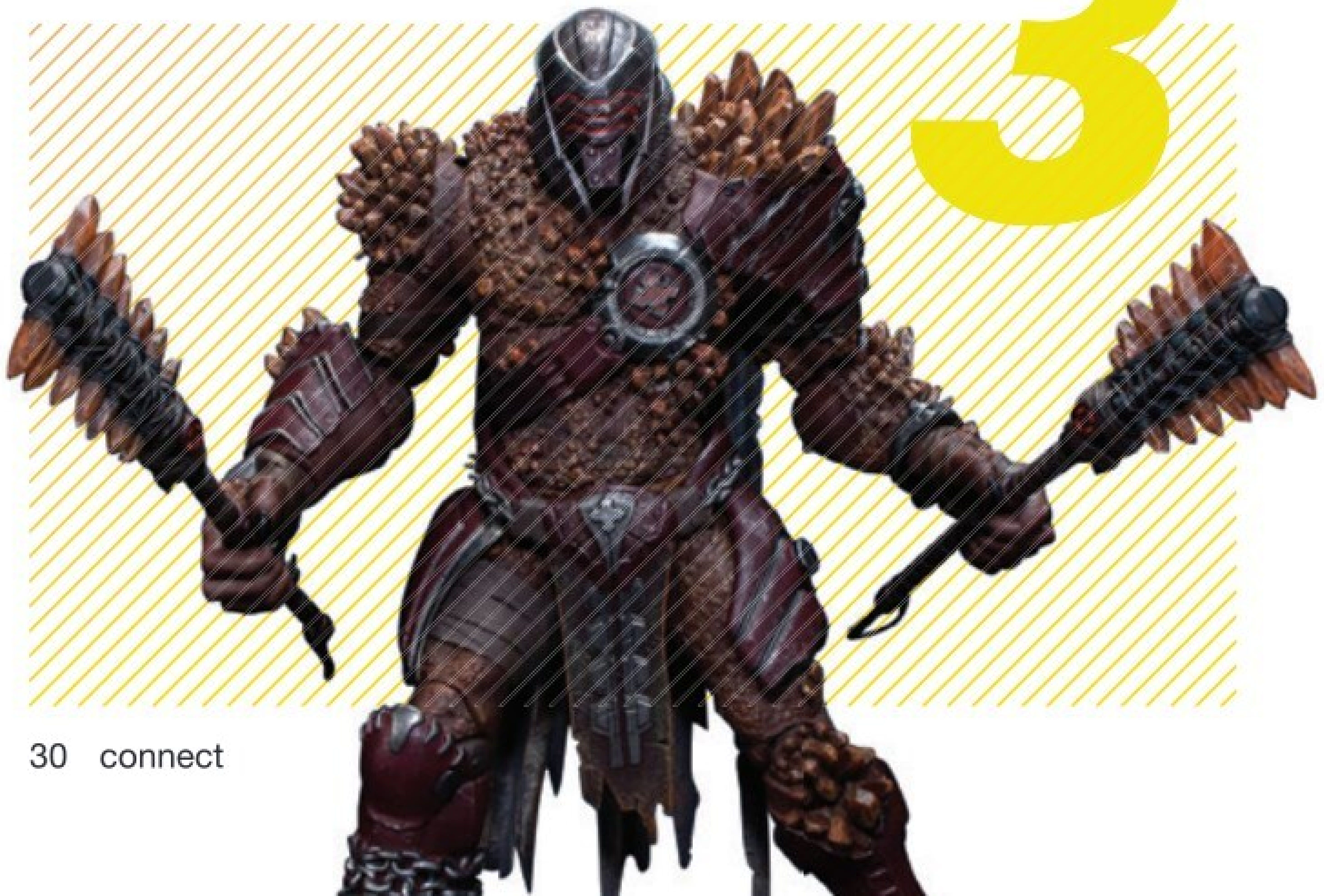
$150 | diamondselecttoys.com

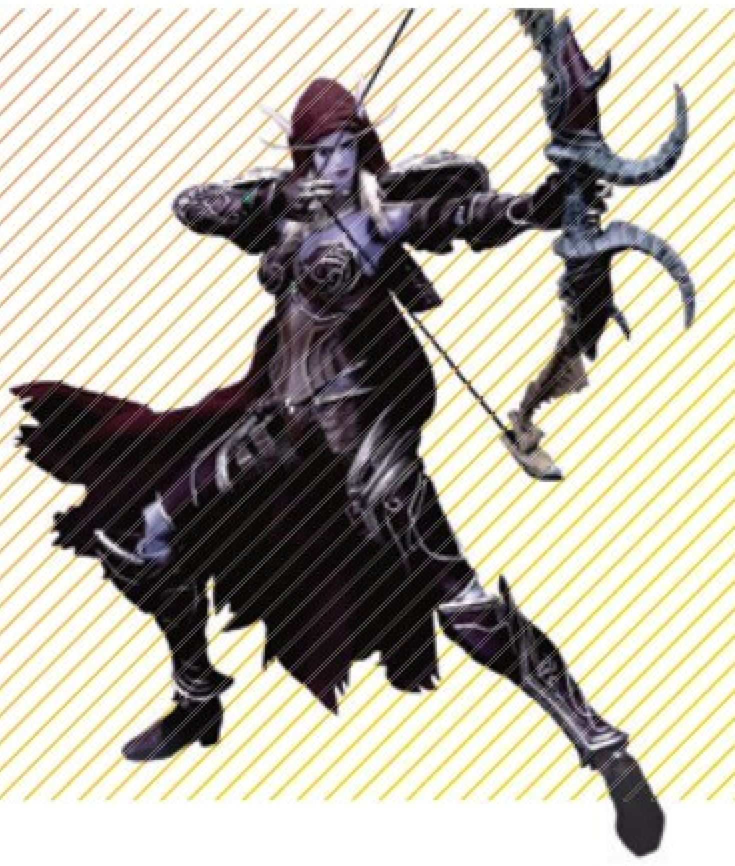
GEARS OF WAR WARDEN ACTION FIGURE

Due for release in September, this pricey Warden action figure is 1/12 scale, and comes with an alternate head sculpt, two Breaker maces, and three pairs of hands for different poses. You'll also find a battle-damaged Gear Infantry helmet that can be worn by action figures of Marcus Fenix or Augustus Cole (both are sold separately).

$100 | stormco.com.hk

3





4

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLE FOR AZEROTH SYLVANAS WINDRUNNER ACTION FIGURE

Standing in at eight inches tall, this highly posable Sylvanas Windrunner action figure comes with a fabric cloak featuring an inner wire, longbow with three arrows, and interchangeable hands. It's scheduled to release this fall.

$89.99 | blizzardgearstore.com

BUILDING SETS FOR A LONG SUMMER AT HOME

by Matt Miller

With plenty of families spending more time at home this summer break, a fun building or construction set is an ideal way to bring everybody together around a shared project. Here are recommendations for builds that are both fun and can keep you busy for a good long while.

1

LEGO STAR WARS A-WING STARFIGHTER

If your family likes to journey to that very particular galaxy far, far away (and who doesn't) then consider the latest entry to the Lego Ultimate Collector's series. With over 1,600 pieces, and featuring intricate detail, the Rebel Alliance's A-wing is a piece that promises a meaningful time investment, and after building, a display and play piece that everyone can enjoy. Set the included pilot inside via the removable cockpit canopy, rotate the laser cannons, and position your angle of attack with the adjustable display stand. Just watch out that you don't crash into any Imperial windows.

$199 | lego.com

2

Q-BA-MAZE 2.0

It's possible you're missing a fun gene if you don't get the joy inherent to a good marble run, but the latest iteration of the Q-BA-MAZE system doubles down on that excitement, featuring remarkable flexibility to the shapes and paths your marble will take through the course. The multi-colored and interlocking cubes can be arranged in virtually any formation, from rockets and towers to animals or just meandering sprawls. Different sets offer everything from stunts (like trampolines and tubes) to long rail sets. The recent Deluxe Lights set is a good place to start, which includes several light-up cubes. Or go big and get the colossal set (pictured), and try out a bit of everything the system has to offer.

$61.95 (Deluxe Lights Set),
$209 (Colossal Set) | mindware.com

Q·BA·MAZE 2.0
The Next Generation Marble Maze
270
Colossal Set

3

ROKR 3D WOODEN GEAR PUZZLE

These mechanical wooden kits are ideal if you have a budding engineer in the family. They're built from individual pieces that you pop out of laser-cut wood frames, before assembling into intricate and interlocking gear connections. The final pieces are gorgeous and have a wind-up feature that works without batteries or other power to propel the completed structure. Go for the impressive size and nearly universal appeal of the old-fashioned locomotive, or if ticking timepieces are more your thing, the pendulum clock can actually keep accurate time.

$50.00 | magnote.com

4

GEOMAG PRO-L MAGNETIC CONSTRUCTION SYSTEM

Magnetic rods and spheres form the skeleton of this flexible building system, while plastic triangles, squares, and pentagons lock into the completed shapes, adding color and stability. The stronger Pro-L series features stronger magnets and visible polarity for especially robust structures. The Skyline New York set is a great place to start, with enough flexibility and pieces to allow for the creation of bridges, skyscrapers, or whatever other geometric abstractions you can concoct, but smaller and larger sets are both available if you wish to customize your investment, or expand your collection.

$90.00 | geomagworld.com

GEOMAG
pro-L
8+
174 PCS
MORE POWER
VISIBLE POLARITY

CYBERPUNK
2077

A VAST FUTURE

THE DARK AND SPRAWLING STREETS OF NIGHT CITY BECKON IN CYBERPUNK 2077

by Kimberley Wallace and Matt Miller

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/RPG

» PUBLISHER
CD PROJEKT

» DEVELOPER
CD PROJEKT RED

» RELEASE
November 19
(PS4, Xbox One, PC),
TBA
(PS5, Xbox Series X)

SOME GAMES ARE AMBITIOUS,

with mechanics and systems we haven't seen before. Some games are massive, offering expansive and dense worlds ripe for exploration. Some games are complex, delving into mature themes involving violence, authority, and sexuality. And then there's Cyberpunk 2077, which aims to be all of those things. It is one of the most overwhelming and intricate open-world games we've played; after multiple *Game Informer* editors spent hours charting their own course through the urban sprawl of Night City, everyone had different experiences to share. But it was easy to agree on one thing: This game is enormous in every sense of the word.

Inspired by and rooted in the world of a long-established tabletop role-playing game, Cyberpunk 2077 catapults players into a lurid future. People dramatically modify and augment their bodies as a matter of course, and enter virtual mindscapes to chase fleeting thrills. Megacorps hold vast power, scheming and killing with impunity. And in the underbelly of this bleak dystopia, outlaw edgerunners chart their own paths beyond the reach of the grasping corporations, leveraging underground connections, insane tech implants, and earned street cred to shape their own destinies. You are V – one of these enigmatic cyberpunks – and you've got a lot of options in front of you.

GROWING BEYOND THE WITCHER

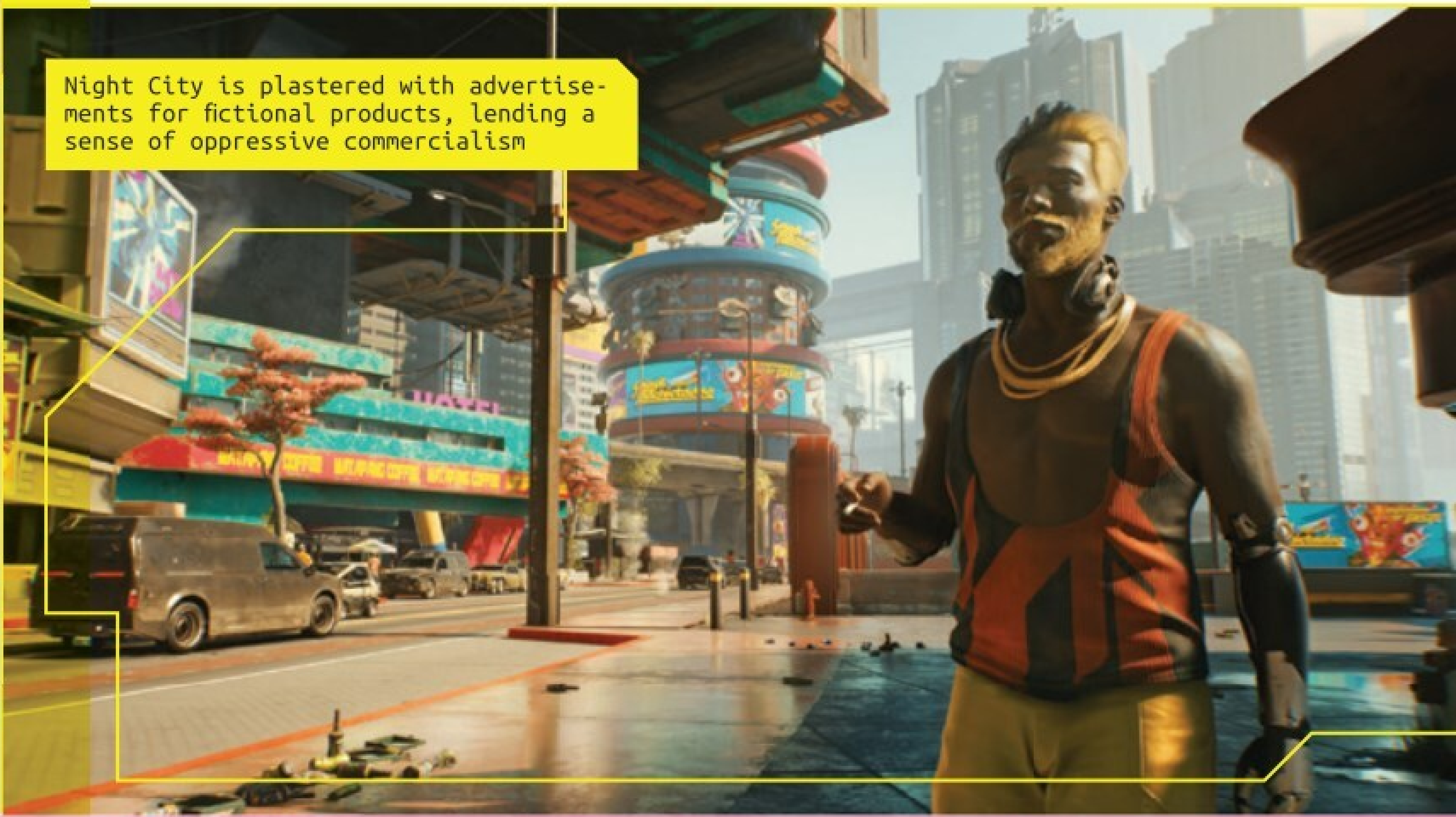
CD Projekt Red loves to take risks and improve with every new project. Since the days of the studio's humble beginnings, the goal has always been to create "big RPGs," and a core part of that philosophy is going the extra mile. In a world where gamers have so many options, CD Projekt recognizes that people need a compelling reason to buy. The company made it a mission to have open conversations with its fans, and earned respect for its generous approach to post-release content.

Over the years, CD Projekt Red has become a studio known for masterful storytelling, specifically with The Witcher series. Geralt's adventures present difficult dilemmas with no easy answers, and the unpredictable consequences of his actions have opened new frontiers of player choice. Nowhere is this more evident than 2015's The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, which raised the bar in terms of scope, narrative, and meaningful decisions. But after spending about 15 years wrapped up in The Witcher, CD Projekt is ready to chart new territory with a new property, leveraging its strengths and challenging its developers in new ways.

Cyberpunk 2077 is so much more than a new setting; it's about giving players the flexibility and freedom to play the game their way. We each spent four hours hands-on with an early build, and it is shaping up to offer a new level for customization in games, allowing you to influence multiple facets of the gameplay and narrative. "It comes from the desire for us to make sure that it feels different from the Witcher series," says level designer Max Pears. "You played the role of Geralt; you had the journal, fought the monsters, had the two types of swords – silver and steel. Here it's more about giving the player freedom. The most exciting part is not only are there so many different ways to play – it's ways to upgrade yourself, to tell your story with who you are fashion-wise. It's the weapons you're going to use, and deciding if you're going to spend your time crafting special ones or finding mods. I think it's just about making sure that we represent that freedom, making players well aware that this is different from the Witcher franchise, that it is exciting to be your cyberpunk in this world."

PRESSING START ON CYBERPUNK 2077

Our demo allows us to play from the very beginning of the game, giving us the ability to fully define our own experience, from customizing V's personality to the skillset we want to use. Similar to Dragon Age: Origins, Cyberpunk 2077 has different prologues that explain V's roots. You choose from three distinct life paths [see sidebar], and you start at different places and meet unique people depending on your origin story. The three of us each played a different path to see how stark these differences are and what they mean for V as a character. After getting a glimpse of how V gets into the mercenary business and befriends their biggest ally, we took on an in-depth story mission that has V teaming up with a legendary fixer that could put them on the map. We saw bits of this mission in previous E3 demos, but there was much more to it in terms of character interactions, gameplay sections, and choices of which characters to align with and the repercussions. CD Projekt Red allowed us to explore the open world and take on side activities with total freedom. Even with hours to explore, everyone who played had the sense that we were only scratching the surface of the game's breadth.



Night City is plastered with advertisements for fictional products, lending a sense of oppressive commercialism

CREATING V

The customization starts before you step foot in Night City with the character creator, which offers extensive options for hair styles, skin tones, scars, facial hair, and makeup. You embody and define V, and here's where you choose a lifepath to give the character. What's impressive about the character creator and its myriad options is these choices speak to the fluidity of this world and the nature of a person's body in the future. People are not defined by the bodies they're born into; they can easily alter their appearance and add cybernetics, and the character creator showcases this well by not limiting the type of character you create or forcing you to adhere to traditional gender identities.

This is also the place where you pick where to invest your first attribute points. The five areas you can invest in are body (raw physical power, increasing health and stamina), intelligence (memory and intellect, improves hacking abilities), reflexes (coordination and speed, enhancing critical chance and evasion), technical (tech aptitude, providing armor bonuses and additional chance of harvesting craftable loot), and cool (self-control and willpower, improves stealth and speed at which NPCs notice you).

As a staff, we went for different playstyles. For hacking, we invested heavily in intelligence and cool, but could still brute force our way through situations with our fists and guns thanks to points spent on body and reflexes. You are never locked into one playstyle, leaving you free to experiment. "The system is built in the way that you can pick and choose," explains quest director Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz. "You don't have to specialize in one skill. You can be a hacker and you can also use the katana, or you can use heavy guns but also be a techie."

In one play session, we had planned to focus on hacking. While we did a fair share of hacking TVs and pushing boxes over to distract guards, we came across a new toy that changed everything: the shotgun. This powerful weapon forces you to get close to enemies, but can annihilate them with one shot. It makes quick work of the baddies, and you feel powerful as hell doing it. We quickly turned our character concept into an intelligent hacker with a penchant for popping off their shotgun if things got too frustrating.

Beyond just getting V's look and skills right, a huge part of the experience is about role-playing the character through dialogue options. You can make V more cautious or silent in shaky situations, trash talk with reckless abandon, or decide to let your weapons speak for you. Having the lifepath options certainly help you fit a mold. For instance, if you play the corporate path, expect V to act untouchable and to see their privilege show. If you pick the street kid, life has hardened you a bit; you're street smart, and can hold your own in any situation. We were impressed by how realistic and varied the dialogue options felt, allowing us to inhabit our V rather than just going through the motions.

Cars may be driven around the city in both first and third-person perspectives

LIZZIE
Lizzie's
TURBO

CITY OF DREAMS //
THE WORLD OF CYBERPUNK 2077

Synapse
Roasters
AOBA

Between countless RPG sourcebooks crafted over decades and an intense investment in worldbuilding from CD Projekt Red, the universe of 2077 is incredibly rich. In play sessions, Night City feels alive and dangerous, but also layered with history and competing interests. “Night City is the city of dreams, because it promises a lot to people who live there,” says quest director Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz. “They all believe they can be at the top, while actually, in truth, most people either end up victims of gang violence or as cogs in the corporate machine.”

In the alternate history of the Cyberpunk fiction, the world was rocked by a series of conflicts in the early 21st century, which saw the collapse of the United States. A subsequent corporate war wiped out whole cities, and the use of viral programs killed the Old Net that had once connected the world. Night City was left devastated by the detonation of a tactical nuke, and recovery took decades.

By 2070, after the conclusion of a secessionist war by several states attempting to withdraw from the recently reformulated New United States, Night City emerged as a free and independent city, separate from external law. The cost for this freedom was steep. Corporate interests prevailed, particularly as the megacorp Arasaka established its North American headquarters within city limits.

As the game opens in 2077, Night City is under siege from within, with gangs, corporations, and other factions all vying for a spot at the table. The surrounding world is hardly doing much better. “2077 is pretty dark,” Tomaszkiewicz says. “It’s a devastated world. The animals are mostly extinct. Birds are gone. The world has been devastated by climate crisis, natural disasters, and political strife. But as you can see when you play the game, people are carrying on.”

In this bleak time, cyberware implants are commonplace, letting people augment their bodies and minds with an endless variety of mods. Some users go overboard and take on so much invasive tech that they succumb to cyberpsychosis, sending them into berserk rampages. Braindance is the defining entertainment of the time, letting users experience the emotions and memories of others; influencers gain followers who literally live vicariously through them. And Night City is awash in hundreds of products and services, many of which are featured in fully realized marketing and ad campaigns that pop up everywhere you go.

As a player, the scope of fictional immersion is hard to overstate. Consider your favorite modern military game and its emulation of real-world guns, or the clever nods to real events in your favorite historical epic, but imagine that same level of depth and detail applied to wholly fictional elements. Cyberpunk 2077 features its own competing brands of cars and fashion lines. An entire street language vernacular is spoken by those you meet. As one of the titular cyberpunks, you are the unaffiliated agent of change in a bespoke world, crafted to appeal to your curiosity and respond to your actions.

Melee combat uses a mix of light and heavy attacks, along with blocks and timed counters

DIVING DEEP INTO PROGRESSION

CD Projekt Red has discussed skill trees and customization in the past, but we were not prepared for the full breadth of options available. Every time we leveled up, exciting new perks beckoned, and finding new gear and weapons of various rarities made us want to search every corner of the world. One of the strongest aspects of Cyberpunk 2077 is how every system has multiple layers. It can be overwhelming at first, but once you get a handle on the way those systems interact, tinkering with them is exhilarating and rewarding.

As you level up, you unlock attribute points and perks. You invest points in improving the main attributes, but each one also has its own branching perk tree for unlocking new skills. For instance, in the intelligence attribute path, there are two hacking paths: device or target. You can mix and match skills from both. Device skills improve your prowess with hacking things like security systems and turrets, while target skills disrupt enemy cyberware, like calling an enemy to another to get them both in range for a grenade detonation. Prefer the subtle approach? A high cool attribute provides options for stealth, like adding aerial takedowns, or a Cold Blood tree that buffs movement, damage, and other effects when your health drops.

How far you go down any given path is determined by the corresponding attribute level, and the more you do something like hack or use a specific gun, the more your proficiency grows. “Basically if you want to level up a skill and a specific weapon … you basically level it up as you use that specific tool,” Tomaszkiewicz explains. “However, the maximum amount to which you can level up that skill is limited by a specific stat. For example, your hacking ability cannot exceed your intelligence stat. So if your intelligence is four, you cannot level up hacking higher than four.”

Beyond core statistics, it wouldn’t truly be a cyberpunk game if you couldn’t install cyberware to improve your body. Here’s where you get your superhuman passive, active, and triggered abilities. All you need to do is visit a Ripperdoc, who can do everything from installing a Mantis Blade in your arm to putting the Kerenzikov reflex device in the nervous system to provide slow motion after dodging an attack. All cyberware has different tiers: legendary, epic, rare, common, and uncommon. The higher the tier, the more slots it requires to install.

And this doesn’t even touch on the fact that all your armor and weapons can also have upgrades installed. For instance, you can put a silencer on your gun to keep your blast from alerting others as you sneak into areas. These can also improve stats, like providing additional armor or increasing your chance for a critical. Even when you go to pick a gun (you can have three equipped at once), you have a plethora of options. In addition to basic pistols and rifles, you also have smart guns, which have self-guided missiles (no aiming required!). You can also equip powerful tech weapons that launch projectiles at lightning-fast speeds and pierce armor. From what we played, the gunplay felt comparable to shooting in other first-person RPGs, though the early weapons from the beginning of the game don’t offer a complete picture. Even so, landing headshots felt great, especially as you could see the damage numbers each bullet produces on an enemy to know which areas to target.

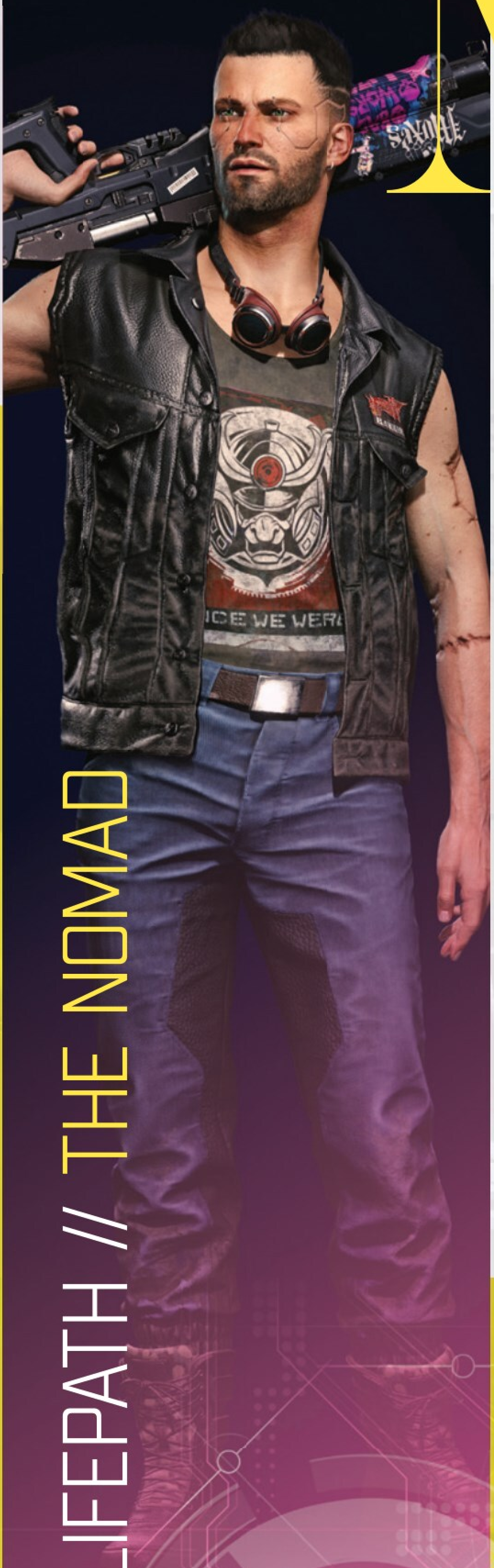
ONE CHARACTER, THREE BACKGROUNDS

Role-playing games must always confront the challenge of providing freedom to shape characters, but also find a way to anchor those protagonists in the narrative of the world. Cyberpunk 2077 solves this dilemma with the concept of the lifepath.

As the game begins, players choose one of three backgrounds for V. Each of these lifepaths features an extended game opening that sets a distinct tone. “Each version of V knows this world from a different perspective,” says quest director Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz. “Later on, you will get additional dialogue options where you can use information from your backstory. Sometimes it will unlock additional quests, and in some cases, it will unlock additional paths through a quest which you wouldn’t otherwise see.”

Curious about which lifepath to try when you play? Watch for the three "Lifepath" sidebars in the coming pages. Each offers a narrated account reflecting our personal playthroughs of the early minutes of the game, and three very different ways to meet one of 2077's most intriguing characters.

LIFEPATH // THE NOMAD



My name is V, and I've been on my own for a long time. Most nomads travel the Badlands in clans – harder to become a target if you're part of the herd, if you know what I mean. That's not for me. I've stayed off the grid for a while now, and it's hard to make ends meet out here. Maybe, with the benefit of hindsight, taking the job will turn out to have been a mistake. But I was hardly going to survive out here much longer. At least in Night City, I can blaze hot for a time before I go dark.

Just my luck, the car breaks down on the way to the pick-up. The local mechanic in this dusty border podunk hardly knows what he's looking at under the hood, so I step in and hotwire a bypass that should get the thing running – at least for a while. Of course, the local sheriff has to show up for a pissing contest – show off what a big fish he is in his dirty little pond. Real gonk. He wants me out of town, but I need their radio tower to connect with my contact. What he doesn't know won't hurt him.

I've got to climb the tower to get a signal, but it's worth the risk. On the comm, Willie does me one last favor and lets me know where my guy has gone after I didn't make the meet-up. I'm worried that the sheriff is going to lose it when he sees me driving back through town, but he must be off hassling somebody else.

I find Jackie Welles in a beat-up trailer in the outskirts. Not exactly a great first impression. More than a little green. Everybody's got to start somewhere, though, even with smuggling. And he's got the goods – looks like something in cryo-freeze.

We chose this spot for a reason – it's only minutes from the crossing. Once we're there, corporate mooks do their thing, guns drawn, shouting like they're badasses. I've seen it before. Jackie tries to pull a fast one and hold on to the bribe, but that's not going to fly. I tell him to hold tight when they call me in for the expected "questioning."

You know the drill. Little room. Uptight agent. Money changes hands. But something's off. This guy is playing a longer game; I can see it in his eyes. I've got that tingle on the back of my neck the whole long walk back to the car. We need to get out of here.

Sure enough, as soon as we're past the crossing, the Arasaka goons pull their vans into view. The guard ratted us out for an extra payday. Now's not the time to cry about it. Jackie's at the wheel, so I lean out the window and start shooting.

It's a close one. This old bucket we're riding in isn't exactly armored up. But I don't think the corporats were expecting this much trouble, much less a high-speed chase, and I'm a fair shot with this pistol. After weaving through some abandoned buildings, and a few unmarked vehicle explosions later, we pull into an old garage and slam the door shut. We've lost them.

Jackie did alright. He might not be as bad as I thought. Yeah, he tried to scam me. But at least he's honest about it. As for the job? I don't normally care about what's in the package, but I've got to know this time. I pull the lid, and see what the fuss is about. An iguana, still breathing and hissing. I suppose it makes as much sense as anything. Not too many of these things left – should pull a fair price in Night City. But I'll need help. I'm not sure this lone-wolf thing is going to fly anymore. There are worse options than teaming up with a guy like Jackie …

Several competing gangs each have their own distinct fashion style and philosophy

STEPPING INTO NIGHT CITY

The best way to describe our first moments in Night City is sensory overload. This is a high-tech, fast-paced world, and everything is vying for your attention. Pay attention to the people around you, and you can unlock cool scenes, like when we stopped to listen to a man preaching about the harm of technology, only to see a group of girls comment on his weird antics and take a selfie in front of him like he was a zoo attraction. Turn the wrong corner and you could come face-to-face with a gang waiting to jump you. Ads plaster the world, showcasing everything from sex toys to water supplements. Excess consumerism is alive and well.

It's not all grim, though. Looking up, you can marvel at the high structures and fantastic architecture. The world's verticality is a nice touch, making you feel like the buildings are pressing down on you. This is a strange universe to step into, and that's part of what makes it so fun to explore. It is a portal into a gritty future that raises questions about our dependence on technology in our own world.

One way this is illustrated is through "braindances," which CD Projekt Red has cleverly implemented into the gameplay. The predominant entertainment format for citizens of Night City in 2077, braindance tech lets individuals dive into the memories of others, experiencing life firsthand from another person's perspective. V gains the additional capability to edit a braindance, which becomes a core path to uncover new information. "It's a tool to find hidden details that most viewers would not find," Tomaszkiewicz says. "For the player, it's actually a gathering of clues that can push investigations forward." Rewind and fast forward through a memory, zooming in and out – perhaps onto important names displayed on a screen – or shift the audio focus to hear a conversation happening across the room. Swap to a thermal observation layer and find a hidden freezer in a concealed floor plan. Each new memory offers a new puzzle to solve, details to uncover, and a disturbing but voyeuristic thrill.

You visit six vast and disparate districts in Night City, from the poverty-stricken Watson to the Vegas-like Westbrook, and you never have a shortage of things to do in the open world. Veer off the main quest path, and you're sure to stumble upon side quests, something CD Projekt Red has earned a reputation for doing extremely well. "Our side content can vary," says quest designer Philipp Weber. "We have those bigger side quests that might be connected to some main characters from the main story, or we also have these small requests that you can find just out in the open world, but of course can turn into something bigger."

Dynamic events also constantly pop up around you, like crimes in progress or gang-on-gang violence. As V, you decide if you want to get involved and reap the rewards. V can also participate in fun activities, like car races, fist fights, and the shooting range. But perhaps the most lucrative venture is to take on gigs. Every area has a fixer who sends V jobs, and these are your main source of income. They can be anything from eliminating a target to sabotaging a server. You can also take on bounties or unearth clues that point to secret stashes.

Driving around the city, this feels like a denser setting than anything CD Projekt Red has previously attempted. It's labyrinthine, so much so you will often be navigating it by car. The driving takes a little getting used to, because there are a lot of tight spaces, and taking wide turns can feel punishing. You can eventually steal different cars, and if you engage in too much crime, your wanted level will rise, meaning you need to lay low for a bit.

Searching the city, we find our share of components and blueprints, which are used for crafting. You can craft upgrades for your weaponry, including scopes, silencers, grenades, and flashbags. CD Projekt Red says some of the rarer armor, such as tech weapons and various gadgets, are made through finding these blueprints and obtaining the required items. Just like in The Witcher 3, you can disassemble junk and get components to use in crafting recipes.

continued on page 46

LIFEPATH // THE CORPO

My name is V, and I live at the top of the world. People dream about the sort of wealth I have, working for Arasaka counter-intel. Of course, everything has a price. So what if I'm so stressed I just threw up in the sink of the executive bathroom?

I take a breath, but can't escape reality as long as my eyes are open; a stock ticker continually scrolls past in my lower-right field of vision, a not-so-gentle reminder of the only thing I'm supposed to care about. A call comes in from my old friend, Jackie Welles. He's not exactly running in the same crowds as I do, but I trust the guy – which I can't say about many. I push him off. I've got to get to Jenkins' office. I'm already late.

Jenkins – my boss. What a piece of work. Being middle management at Arasaka still means he's got more power than he can handle. He's taking risks lately, and I feel like I'm just along for the ride. He may have gotten me where I am, but it's not worth it if he gets me killed in the process.

Like everything in this building, Jenkins' office is dark, cold, and bigger than it needs to be. He's watching the vote in the European Space Council. I've seen this look on him before. He's about to make a play.

I don't know why I'm surprised when half the people on the screen start screaming, clutching at their heads as their implants burn their brains out from the inside. We would have lost the license, but this buys us a week. Subtlety is not exactly Jenkins' M.O.

The call comes in from Abernathy almost instantly. Jenkins went rogue on this one, so it stands to reason that his boss would be pissed. The cover-up is going to cost a fortune.

After getting reamed out, Jenkins plays it cool. He's been slyly working against Abernathy for a long time now, but now he's putting the gears in motion. He hands me a shard. I insert the data device into the personal port in my head.

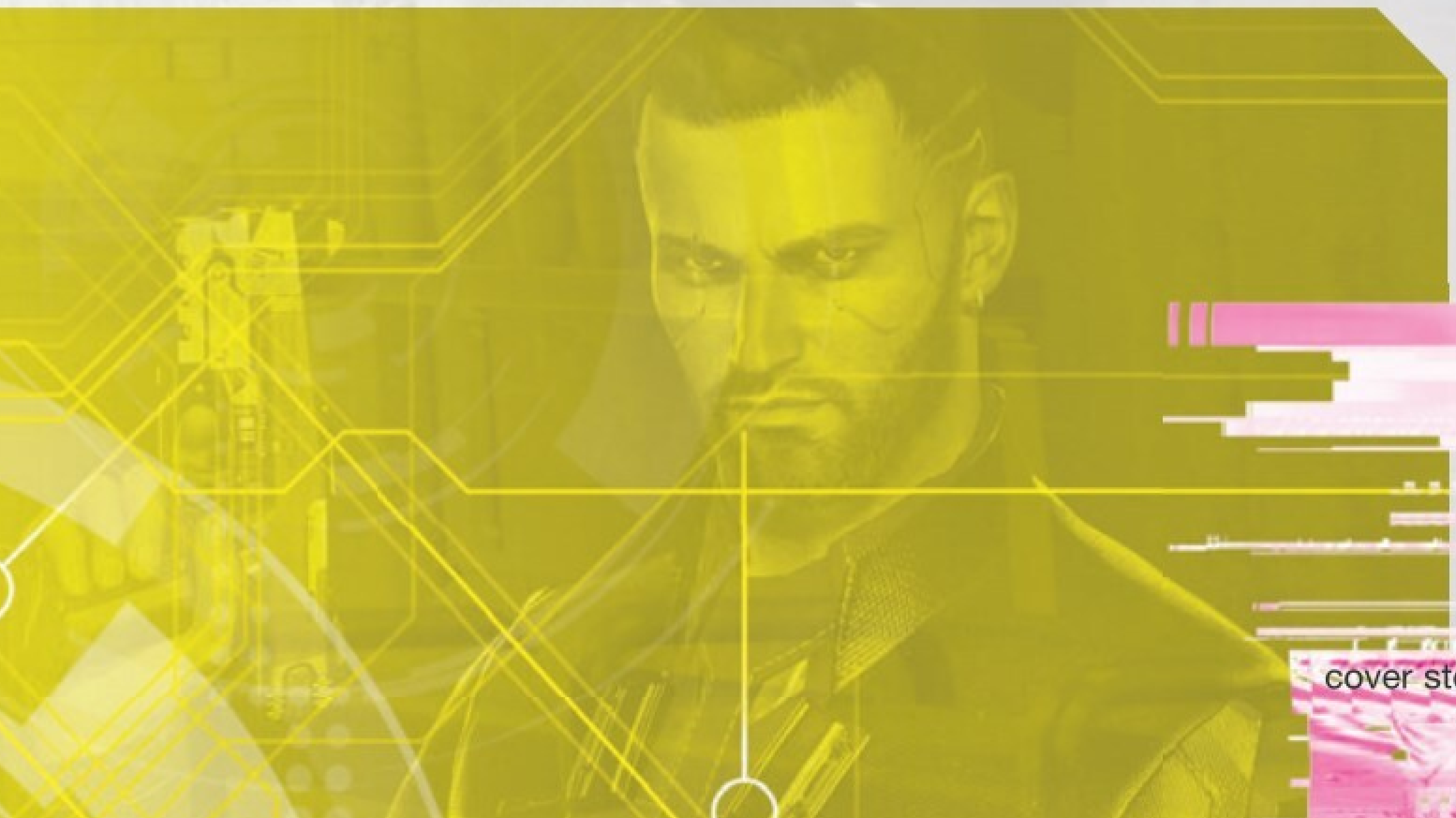
He's got everything. Abernathy's accounts. Her trauma team info. Her lover. Her lover's husband. It's all there. And he tells me what I knew was coming. I'm supposed to take her out. He hands over a stack of eddies, hefty enough to hire the muscle – physical cash, so it can't be traced. I put the question to him, but I already know the answer. What if I refuse? It's not a request.

I take Jenkins' personal A.V. down into the city. Flying over all those neon-lit buildings and little people scurrying around, I think about how we're all in the same bowl trying to stay above water however we can. I down a glass of champagne in one swig, and listen to the news drone a bull story about the space council deaths.

Jackie meets me at Lizzie's bar. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to need his help. But he sees the same thing I do. This one's a loser, and he knows it. And, sure enough, that's when the Arasaka heavies show up. There's too many to fight. They know about the hit. Abernathy probably had eyes on Jenkins from the start. I'm dead.

With one wordless command from the head thug, it's all gone. They seize my swanky pad. I watch in my HUD as my accounts get zeroed out. No more stock ticker – all my mods go dark. I can barely think straight, as my brain goes into withdrawal from all the hormone stabilizers blinking off.

Before they haul me away, Jackie steps in. They're on his turf, and they know it. If guns come out, not everyone is going home. But he's sticking his neck out, and I don't know how I'll ever repay the guy. Abernathy's guy figures I'm a goner anyway, without anything to my name. They take off. But they've forgotten about the hard eddies reserved for the hit. It's not much, but maybe it's enough. It was time for something new, anyway …



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LIFEPATH // THE STREET KID

My name is V, and nothing's ever come easy. I'm from a pushy world, and that means sometimes I've had to push back. I can hold my own in a fight, but my best weapons are street smarts and cred; not many people know the urban jungle like me. Still, I'm not here forever. I'm moving up in the world.

Heywood may not be the safest place, but there's opportunity if you work for it. Walking my neighborhood, filled with graffiti and gang members, it's easy to make assumptions. But these are loyal people. Even as I sit at one of my favorite spots, a dive bar called El Coyote Cojo, I can feel the camaraderie. Folks are shooting pool and hitting the arcade machines. A shot of tequila sets my nose back into place. Much better! You should see the other guy.

I've known the bartender forever, but free drinks require the occasional favor. Today, he wants me to square his debts with the local info broker. Kirk is as cocky as he is brash, lounging in his "office" of a booth upstairs. I roll up to Kirk's spot, ready to get down to business, except the fixer's bodyguard boxes me in while stuffing his face with a burger. Rude.

Kirk's not feeling like doing my buddy any favors on his debts. He knows he can get more out of me in order to wipe the slate clean. I'm known as someone who gets things done, so he says he'll let up as long as I complete an "easy car-theft job" for him. He has his eye on a fancy model – supposedly only a handful in existence. To save my buddy losing his legs, I agree.

On my way to the target, I bump into an old friend of mine. While Padre may be a man of the cloth, he's not exactly what you'd expect. You certainly wouldn't want to cross him. He's covered in tattoos, has his own driver who looks like a force to be reckoned with, and he's one of the most experienced fixers in Heywood. Padre gives me a ride, and I fill him in on the job.

Violence is just another type of conversation in these streets. As if to remind me, a gang member rolls up and points a gun at us through the car window. Apparently, he has some beef with Padre. Sure, I could stay silent, but that's not how these conversations are meant to go. I tell him off, making it clear the type of trouble he's messing with. He backs up, and I get to my job.

It's supposed to be easy, but I know better. The guards have been bribed to look the other way and turn off the camera, so I can escape with the wheels. But even as I get in the car and insert the key, an armed silhouette approaches the door out of nowhere. I recognize him: Jackie, Padre's driver. He overheard my conversation and decided to screw me over. I try to speed off and leave Jackie in the dust, but the damned car won't start. I'm cornered.

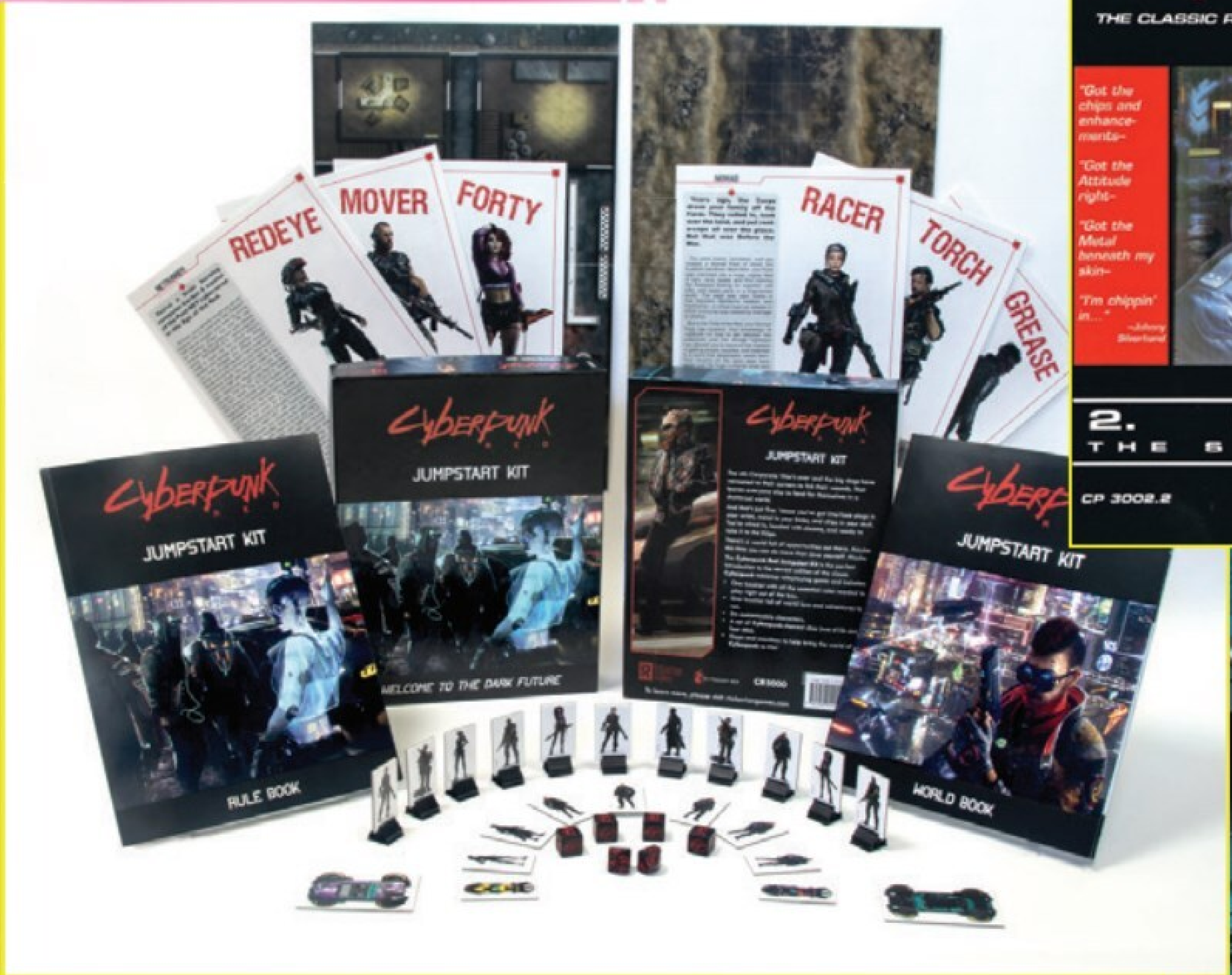
As Jackie's about to lay down some force, more visitors show up – the police. Cuffed on the ground together, the fuzz remarks about how they know both of us all too well. I run my mouth a little, but when the cops bring out the rich corpo who owns the car, he tells them we're not worth arresting and they should just throw us over the dock and let us drown. Next thing I know, a baton knocks me out. I figure that should have been it. But somehow, when I wake up, I'm sitting next to Jackie, who must have had a hand in keeping us alive. I suppose I should be pissed and let him have it. But we both realize we have bigger fish to fry, with common enemies and common goals. Perhaps it's the start of a beautiful partnership. Two Heywood natives, searching for something bigger and better…

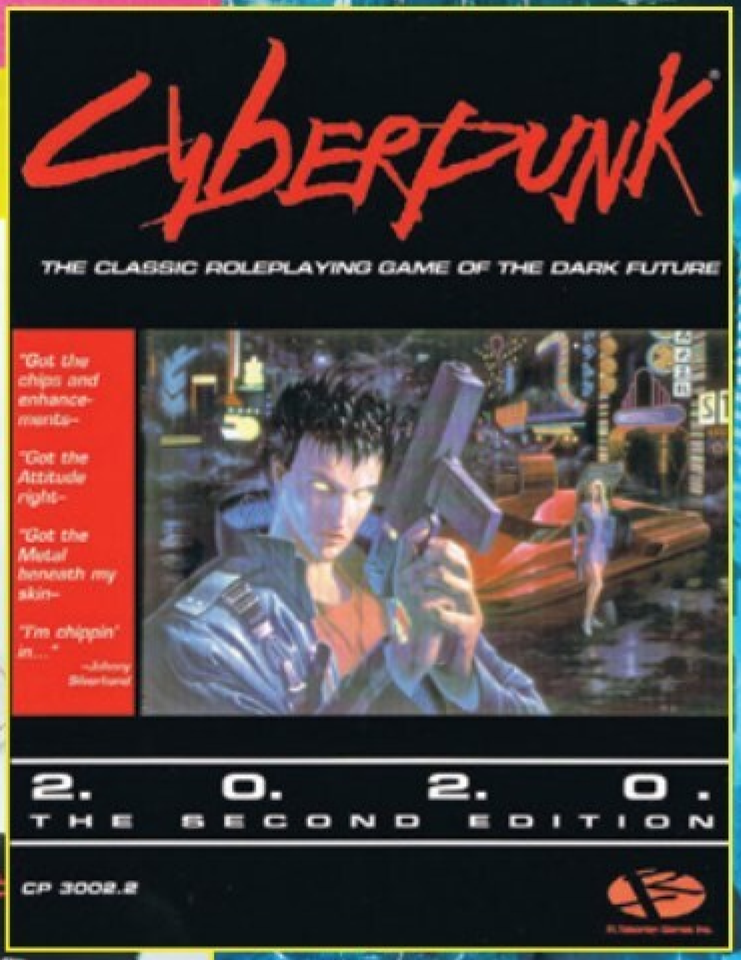
ON THE EDGE //
THE ORIGINS OF CYBERPUNK

Cyberpunk 2077 is one of the most anticipated video game releases of the year, but it's certainly not a game or setting that arose fully formed in 2020. The video game is the digital evolution of a franchise that has existed for decades. The original Cyberpunk tabletop role-playing game released in 1988, brought to life by designer Mike Pondsmith and built to emulate some of the gritty and tech-infused science fiction of the time.

That cyberpunk movement was born out of new wave sci-fi in the '60s and '70s, when a fresh and diverse group of authors wrote stories that challenged conventions. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) served as direct inspiration for *Blade Runner* (1982). Comics like *Judge Dredd* (1977) and manga like *Akira* (1982) fueled a growing popularity. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) fired up imaginations around virtual reality and A.I.

For Pondsmith, early cyberpunk clicked. It was an aesthetic of rebellion and dystopian counterculture pushing back against authority, intermixed with technology that was changing what it means to be human. "I was fascinated by the juxtaposition of really cool science-fiction technology, but that the place it was being used in was this totally craptastic world," Pondsmith says. *Blade Runner* acted as a chief inspiration, but it was a lesser-known project that acted as the second tentpole. "One of my friends was running a Mekton game – our giant robot game – and one of the people in his game was Walter Jon Williams, the science-fiction writer. Walter had done a book called *Hardwired*. And that was the second big influence. *Hardwired* made me think about agency in a *Blade Runner* universe. I liked the idea of emphasizing the punk over




Cyberpunk
THE CLASSIC ROLEPLAYING GAME OF THE DARK FUTURE
"Got the chips and enhancements–
"Got the Attitude right–
"Got the Metal beneath my skin–
"I'm chippin' in..."
–Johnny Silverhand
2. 0. 2. 0.
THE SECOND EDITION
CP 3002.2

the cyber. You have the technology, but the technology becomes part of the source of your agency in this lousy world."

That concept of personal agency became foundational to what distinguished the Cyberpunk RPG. "You're not a victim. You're not a helpless person in that world," Pondsmith says. "The punk side is that you're willing to become someone who engages. You're willing to get in the face of the powers that be, and ask why?"

After its initial release, Pondsmith and his company, R. Talsorian Games, ushered the Cyberpunk universe through dozens of product and book releases, and multiple editions, including the popular Cyberpunk 2020 edition in 1990. Through it all, Pondsmith aimed for immersion in the world, and accessible rule systems that felt realistic without getting bogged down in minutiae. Of equal importance, the game aimed for timeline consistency and discrete narratives that moved the world forward. "I look at Cyberpunk as an ongoing running comic," Pondsmith says. "And like comics, it has arcs."

Thanks to those efforts, when CD Projekt came calling, it was easy to imagine continuing to push that timeline forward into a new arc, one that would return to the same world, decades later in 2077. But the Polish video game developers arrived with a surprising depth of knowledge about the game. Pondsmith recalls early meetings with the team, some of whom had grown up with the game he had designed, exploring themes of rebellion in the final years of Soviet control of their country. "One of the things they said that cracked me up, was that: 'We had Cyberpunk, and we had communism,'" Pondsmith recalls.

As the video game took shape, Cyberpunk's creator cites a close working relationship with CD Projekt Red throughout the project, and his appreciation for their commitment to the fiction he has continued to craft for all these years. In his conversations with the development team, he highlights two central facets that he hopes Cyberpunk 2077 will embody. One aspect is the focus on setting. "It's not a world you ignore – the world is a character," Pondsmith insists. "Night City is a character. It should have a feeling of urban movement, density, and different types of places colliding in the same city."

And the second focus is the nature of the story being told. "Cyberpunk, by its nature, is about a personal thing," Pondsmith insists. "You don't save the world. You might do that on the side, as an outcome of something you do, but it's always personal. Johnny Silverhand tackles one of the biggest corporations on the planet, and he doesn't do it to save the world, or because Arasaka's evil. He does it because 'they kidnapped my freaking girlfriend. So I'm going to make them pay.'"

Not everything about the Cyberpunk tabletop experience is about looking back. R. Talsorian Games has been hard at work on a new edition, which among other things ties the fiction of the original RPG to the new video game. "Cyberpunk Red bridges the point between 2020, post-war, and takes us almost up to 2077," Pondsmith says. "You get to see that evolution, and you get to be a player within that world. Because we've unified everything across the timelines, what happens is that you're playing the game, and you put the controller down, you might wonder: How did this happen? So you go over to Red, and it will tell you more of the story." The full Cyberpunk Red core rulebook is set to release later this year, with a starter Jumpstart Kit available now, offering the perfect headstart to gamers eager to discover more about this intriguing world.

BUCK-A-SLICE
GAS
NO REGRETS

The bleak waste of the Badlands surrounds Night City

continued from page 40

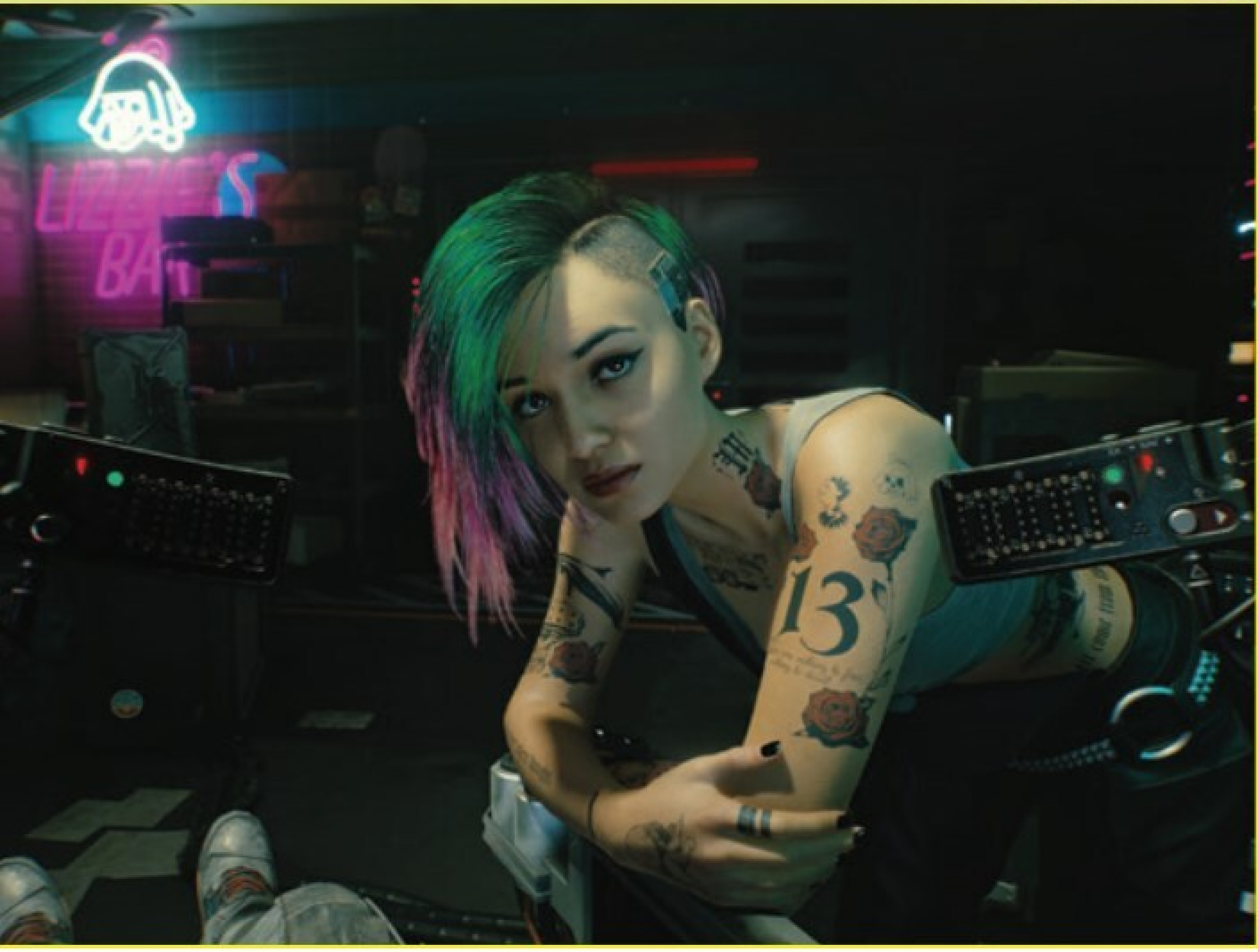
PURE AMBITION AND THE POWER OF CHOICE

CD Projekt Red is a leader in the role-playing genre with its ability to give players choice and freedom. The way the gameplay and story intertwine is what makes Cyberpunk 2077 so fascinating. To see this play out on a grand stage, we take on a story quest called "The Pickup." You might remember seeing portions of this quest from E3 presentations. This is the job that's supposed to turn you into a legend, and it's also a great introduction to this unpredictable world and the various ways to chart your path. "This quest showcases many different story nonlinearities combined with gameplay nonlinearities, which was our goal for quests in Cyberpunk 2077," Tomaszkiewicz says, pointing to the large number of choices and variations with different outcomes.

Your goal is simple: obtain a high-tech military spider-bot. The Maelstrom gang, whose members abuse illegal cyberware to become more machine than human, stole this from one of the megacorps, a military weapon supplier called Militech. An optional decision here is to meet with Militech agent Meredith Stout. You could try to cut a deal with her if you get the spider-bot back, or you could bypass her altogether; she's no-nonsense and hard to read. Can you trust someone who works for a corrupt megacorp? If you do meet with Stout, it opens up additional choices and determines if she shows up later when you meet with Maelstrom.

We all ended up seeing what Stout had to say, but used that encounter differently. Stout hands you a credchip telling you to pay Maelstrom with it. If you have the right skillset, you can detect that it's laced with a virus. It's up to you if you want to use it or confront her about it, but whatever you do, it opens up different paths in the quest. When you show up for the spider-bot, Maelstrom changes the terms of the deal, asking you to pay double for the bot. One of us got frustrated by this and just pulled our gun out mid-conversation, initiating an immediate combat sequence. This actually causes you to bypass a difficult boss battle later. Another one of us agreed to the

BODY WITHOUT LIMITS

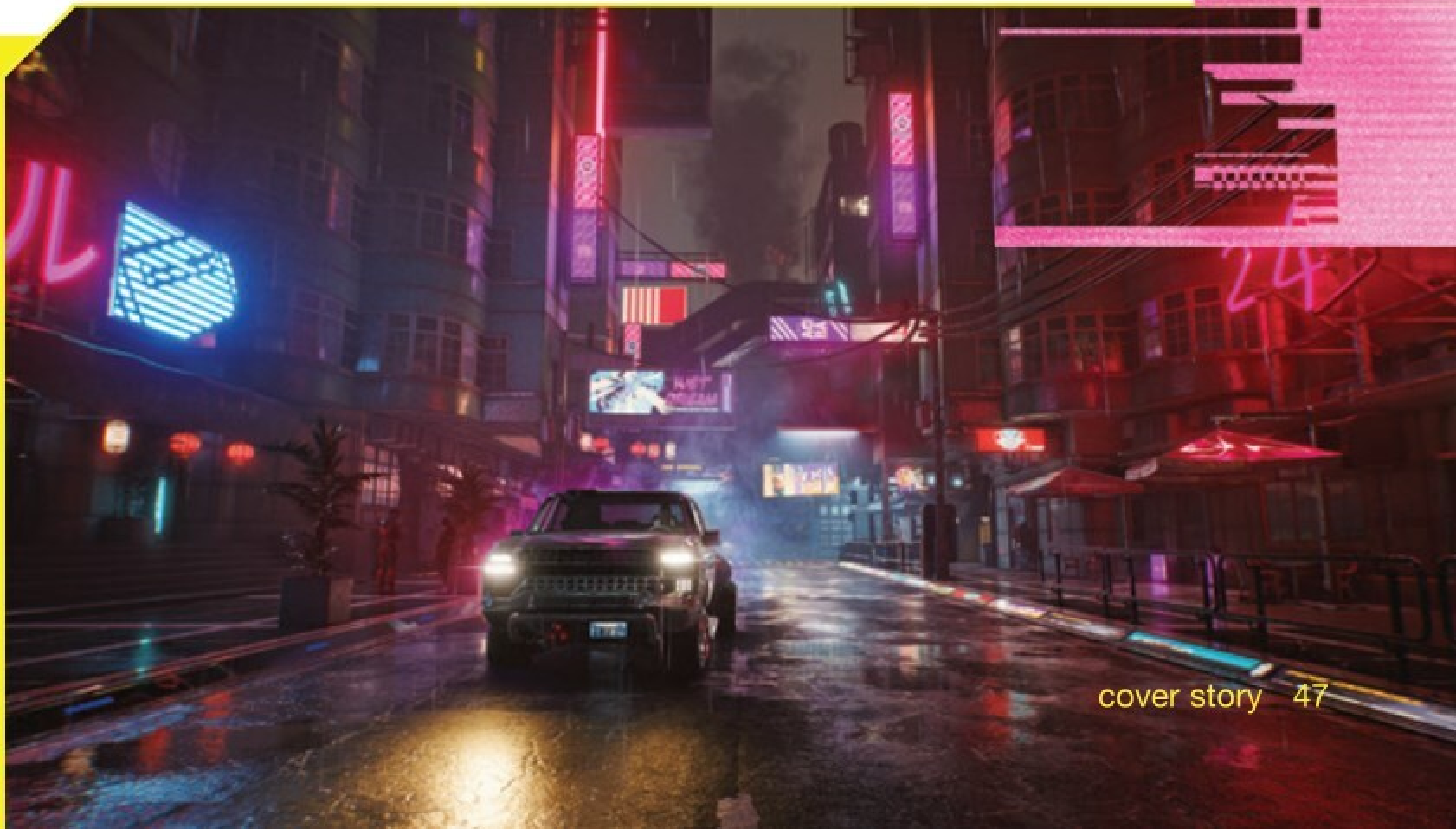


demands and handed Maelstrom the virus-infested credchip, which causes Militech to come in and kill off the Maelstrom gang – but it also makes for a harder escape sequence. You can still bypass the difficult boss with stealth, but it won't be simple. If you take the battle on, you need to find cover and shoot at weak areas, especially targeting his flamethrower-like weapon's tank so he can't use it and it blows up.

We also could have warned Maelstrom about the virus, which leads to an appreciative "thank you" and walking away with the spider-bot. This also ultimately determines if Stout or another character emerges successful in an internal Militech power struggle. Of course, if we were feeling generous in the name of peace, we could have solved this entire situation without any hostility if we just paid Maelstrom's doubled fee with our own money, but it's a pretty large sum. Even during the quest, there are certain side paths that you may not see the ramifications for until later down the line, like if you find Maelstrom's previous leader in a booby-trapped prison cell, and how you respond. We don't know how far-reaching these playstyle variations will be in the full game, but we were surprised by how different our playthroughs were in how events unfolded.

After our four hours, we feel like we barely saw a sliver of this vast world. The possibilities for what's in store are endless. Much of the story has remained under lock and key due to spoilers, but we do know that in addition to the six revealed districts, players will make visits to cyberspace, where only the most experienced netrunners go. "For us, cyberspace is a storytelling tool," says lead quest designer Paweł Sasko. "As a player, you will be going into cyberspace multiple times throughout the storyline, and each time something very specific happens. So it's not that as a player you can freely explore cyberspace. This is more story-focused. You're meeting specific beings, and uncovering more mysteries regarding how it was made, how it came to be, and how it works. That's what I can say without just going completely into spoilers."

Cyberpunk 2077's enormous dystopian city imparts a strange sensation. Wandering its streets, and encountering its beleaguered tech-overwhelmed inhabitants, it's often troubling to see parallels to real-world issues, like getting a peek into the darkest future timeline. And yet, that same disturbing place invites exploration, and the thrill of seeing what lies around the next corner. Like the genre from which it draws its name, Cyberpunk 2077 warns us about a dangerous path society might take, but one that we just can't look away from. ◆



» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1 or 2-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» PUBLISHER
Activision

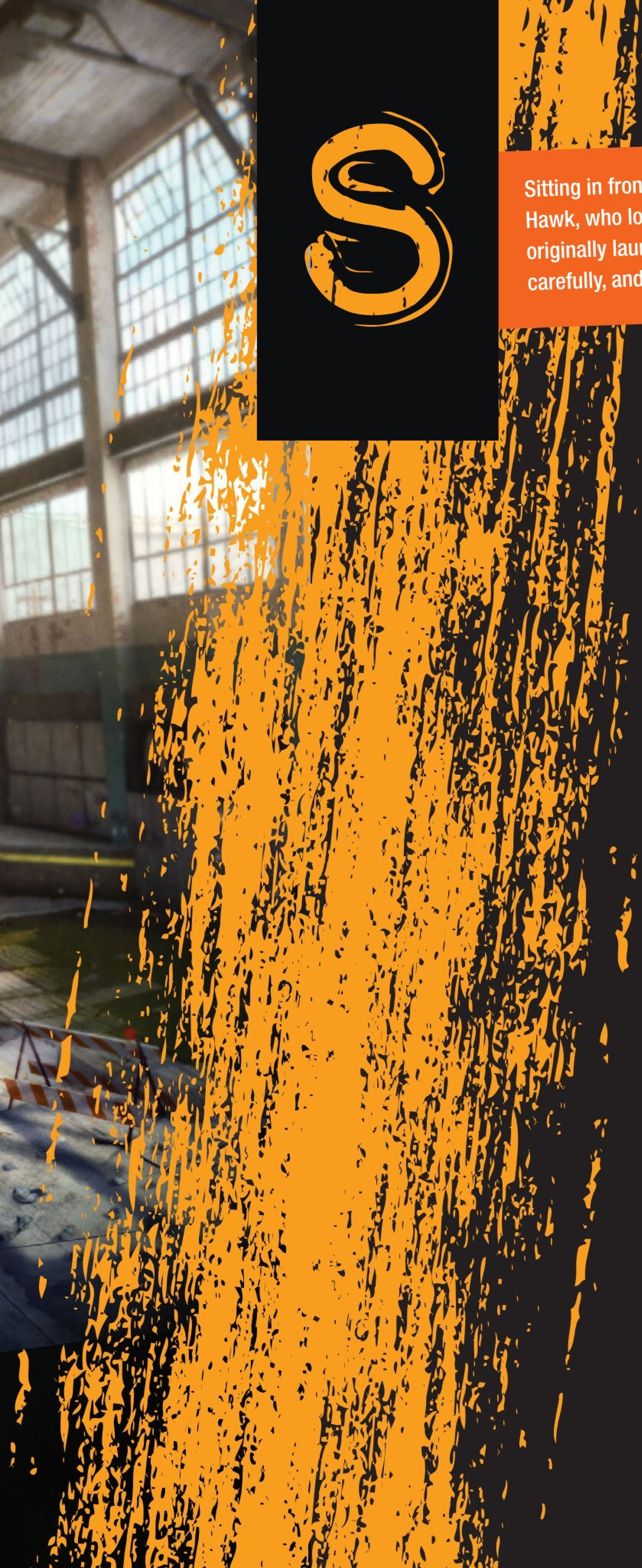
» DEVELOPER
Vicarious Visions

» RELEASE
September 4

THE BIRDMAN FLIES AGAIN!

HOW TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER IS COMING BACK IN A BIG WAY

by Andrew Reiner



Sitting in front of a colorful wall of Birdhouse skate decks, a fit Tony Hawk, who looks only slightly older than he did when Pro Skater originally launched in 1999, takes a deep breath, weighs his thoughts carefully, and then outlines what went wrong with his gaming series.

"I think the market flooded as things progressed," Hawk says. "There were BMX games, surfing games, wakeboarding games, and snowboarding games. You didn't know how to gauge the quality of all of them because they were coming so fast. In terms of our series, for sure EA's Skate franchise split the market in half. Our sales were definitely affected by that, and their sales weren't as strong as they thought they would be with only so much market to share. Eventually, everyone gave up."

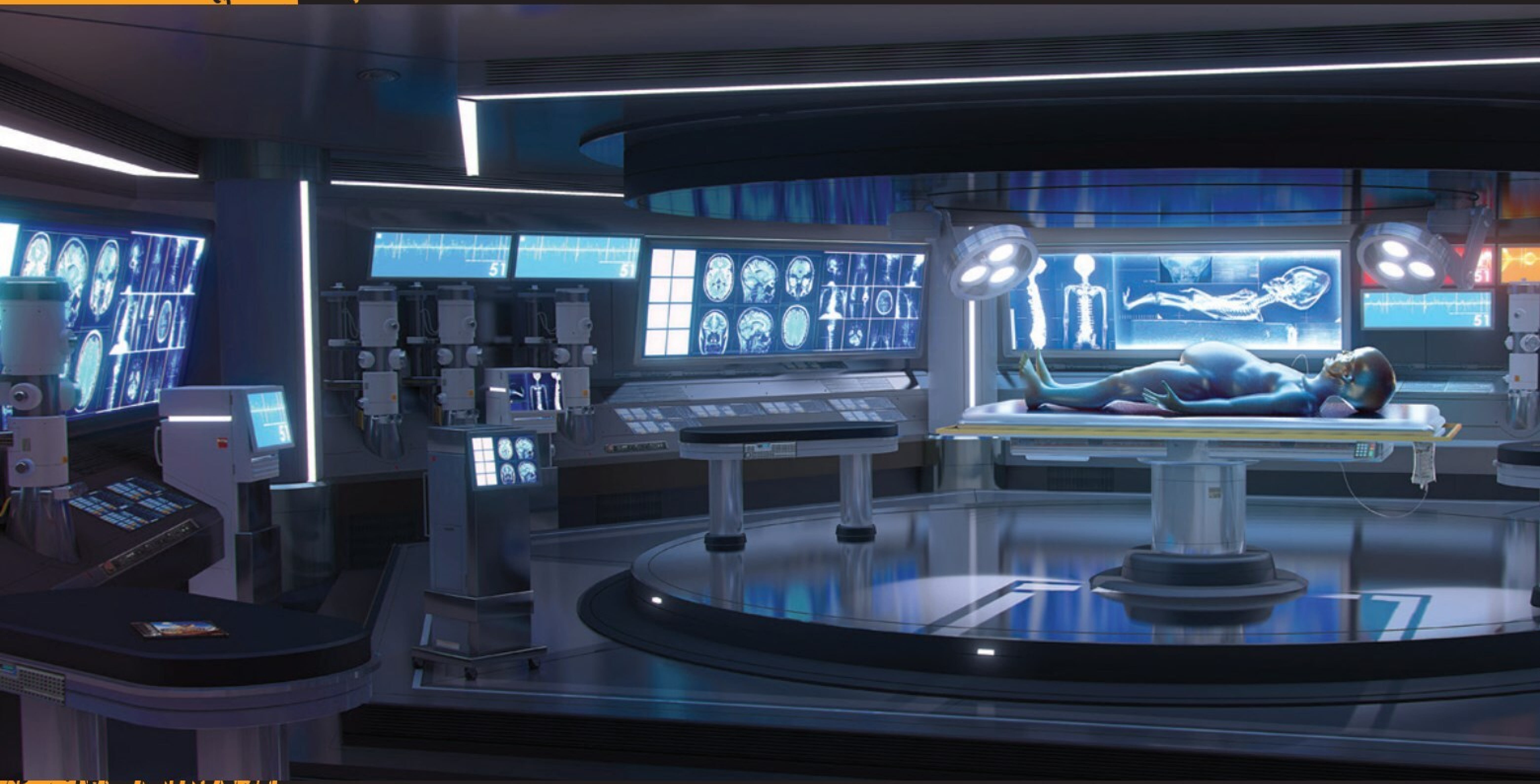
Following the 2007 release of Tony Hawk's Proving Ground, developer Neversoft intended to make another sequel to keep the series running. One of the ideas was to put Tony Hawk's home and backyard (which has its own skatepark) into the next game as a level. People on the development team spent days at the Hawk residence, taking photos of everything to make the level as authentic as possible. Work on that stage began in earnest.

"I got a call less than a month later," Hawk remembers with a sigh leading into his words. "It was from Joel [Jewett, Neversoft's then founder and president]. He said, 'Look, we don't have the energy, we don't have the excitement. I don't think we're going to do it again.' I understood. It was obviously disappointing, but we had come so far and didn't want to keep recycling things. It was a risk for them to put all of their resources into a game that likely wouldn't get the same sales. They were deep into other things like Call of Duty and Guitar Hero. They had their hands full."

After Neversoft's departure, publisher Activision didn't give up on the Tony Hawk brand. Attempts to breathe new life into it veered into in the realm of the unexpected with Tony Hawk: Ride and Tony Hawk: Shred, two games that used a physical skateboard as the controller. Robomodo, the development team behind those failed experiments, was then tasked to bring back Tony Hawk's Pro Skater as an HD port – another effort that wasn't met with much fanfare. Robomodo's last hurrah was 2015's Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5, a disastrous attempt to continue the series.

Now five years later, Activision hopes to revitalize the Tony Hawk series. The time is right to try again, and Activision believes it has the right developer for the task in Vicarious Visions, the studio that successfully brought back the classic Crash Bandicoot games as remasters. Vicarious hopes to rekindle the excitement for the Pro Skater games in the exact same way, by giving players the chance to experience the games that put the series on the map with high-end remasters of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2, which will be packaged together.

"This is just the start," Hawk says confidently. "I'm excited to bring [these games] to a new generation. There's a whole group of people that have never played it or any other skate game. With that baseline we're hopefully going to be able to help remaster other titles – Pro Skater 3 and 4 even – and start to work on a new direction. That's the ultimate goal for me. I think this remaster will give people everything they expect from it, but they'll also be pleasantly surprised with how true to the original it is."



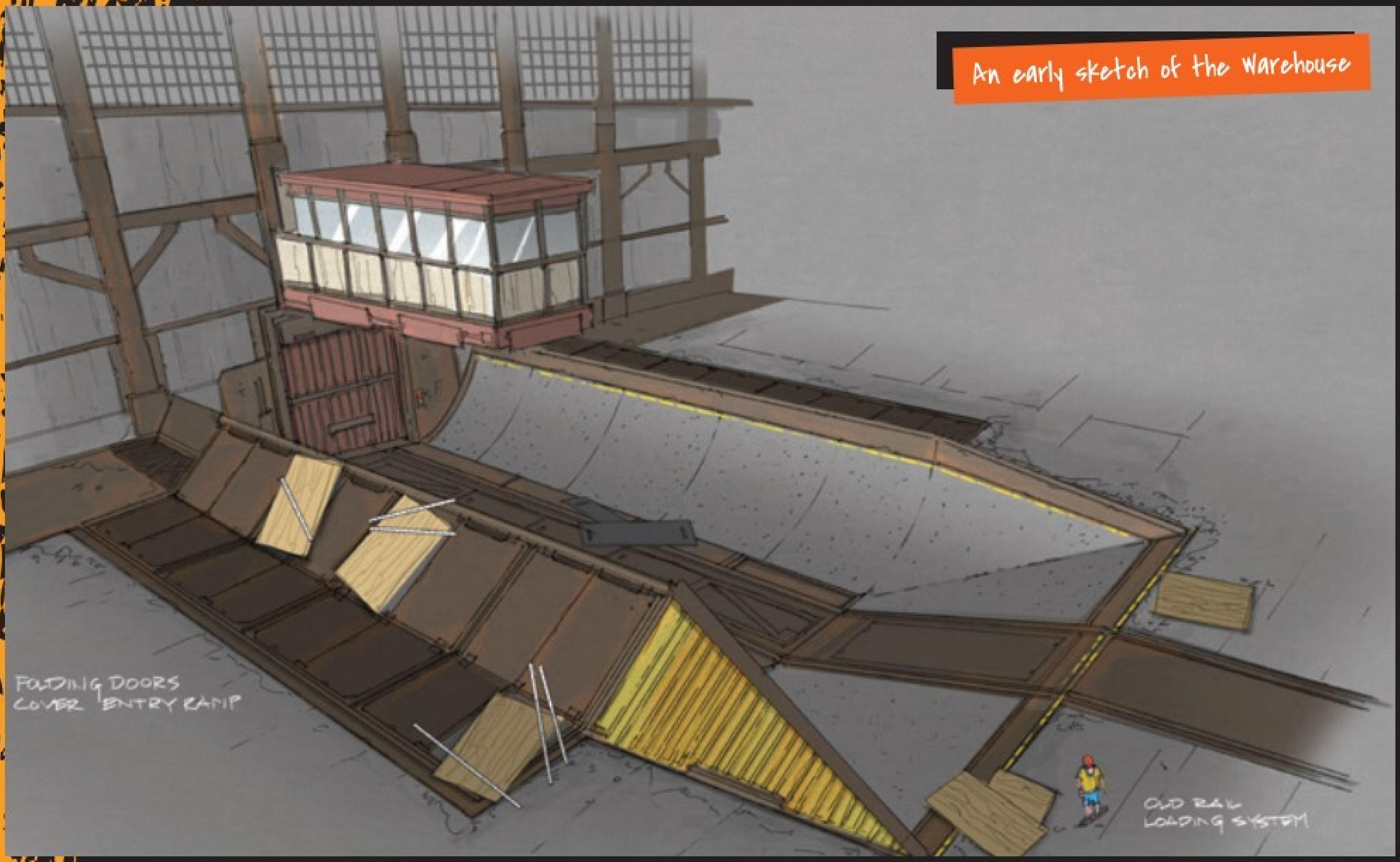
Vicarious Visions wants to make this remaster effort as true to the original games as possible. When asked if players would still be hunting down hidden VHS tapes or if something more modern would take their place, Vicarious' art director John Dobbie said that players may have to ask their parents what "this crazy black box" is, but that's how committed the team is to honoring the nostalgia of the game.

"We had a lot of tough conversations about getting things right," adds lead designer Leo Zuniga, a skater who began his video game career as a tester for the original Pro Skater game. One of those conversations was over the graphical fidelity and flow of the levels. In 1999, the PlayStation hardware didn't allow for worlds to be littered with objects and little details. For a game like Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, that barrenness led to clean lines for grinding and soaring. Flash forward 20-plus years to machines that can create photo-realistic visuals, and those levels don't hold up.

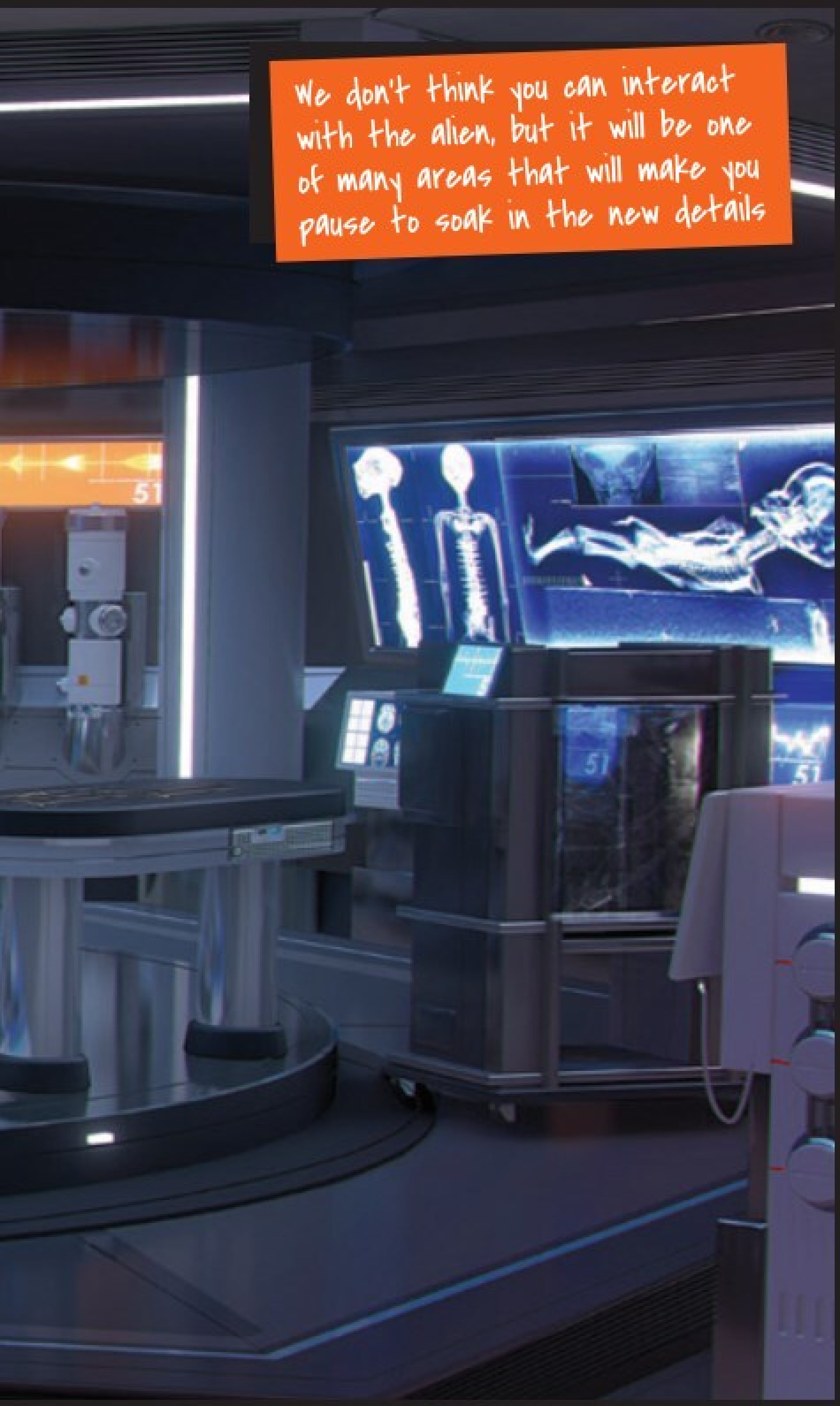
"The geometry is sacred," says Dobbie, who worked on three Tony Hawk games with Neversoft starting with American Wasteland. "The fans with muscle memory should be able to just pick it up, but when it comes to visuals, the nature of the era of those games could only do so much with geometry and texture resolution, so the things on the art side we had to solve were on the scale side. You'd go inside of the school's gym and the basketball hoop would be like 10-feet wide. As you were playing back then you were like, 'That looks cool, that's fun.' It didn't matter. Now, when you are trying to bring everything into reality, you realize you could fit two basketball courts into the space [Neversoft used for one]."

Figuring out how to add new detail and realism without sacrificing the flow and gameplay was a big challenge for the development team. Vicarious believes the solution they landed on with be shocking visually – such as the school now holding the authentic detail of a Southern California elementary school with more vibrant and cleaner colors – but the skating should unfold as fans remember it – with the same lines and scoring opportunities just within environments that hold far more realism. "It's like going back 20 years," says Zuniga. "Only now instead of 100 polygons it's like a million polygons with normal maps and crazy lighting."

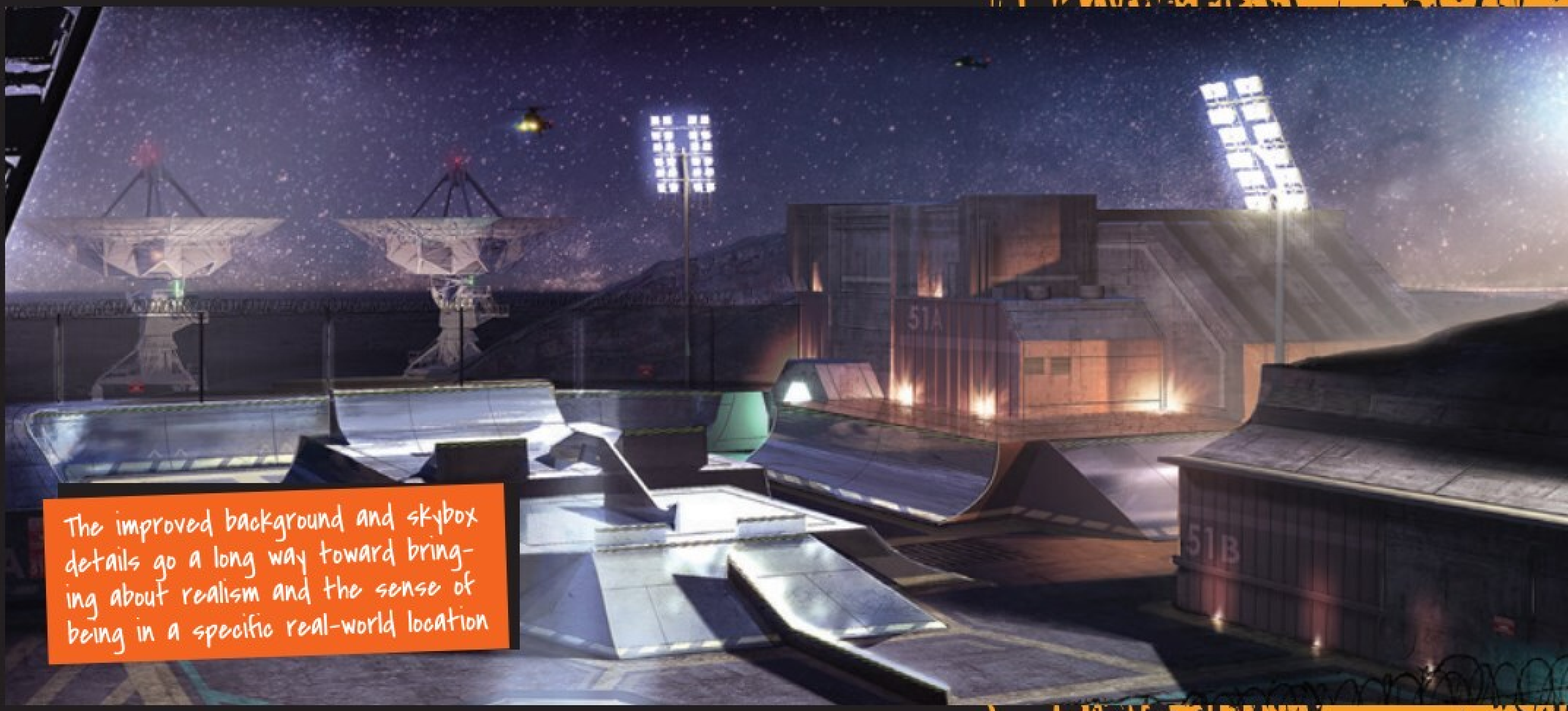
Vicarious Visions scouted abandoned and rundown warehouses in New York City to give the popular Warehouse level the appropriate rusted out and dangerous appearance. One of the first things most



An early sketch of the Warehouse



We don't think you can interact with the alien, but it will be one of many areas that will make you pause to soak in the new details



The improved background and skybox details go a long way toward bringing about realism and the sense of being in a specific real-world location

players will do is roar down the Warehouse's ramp, cut quickly to the right, and launch off of the lip of the halfpipe to gain the altitude needed to crash through the windows of the control room. Vicarious says this moment alone should be a good indicator of just how greatly improved the visuals are.

The geometry for the Roswell level hasn't changed at all, but the level has taken on an entirely new life. It now looks like a secret military base with giant satellite dishes in the distance to monitor UFO activity. The base's interior is lined with high-definition displays and state-of-the-art technology used to analyze an alien body that appears to be ready for dissection.

Even if you have the muscle memory to play through a level the way you did back in the day, you probably won't hit the scoring goals, thanks to the addition of the Revert, a move that allows players to link aerial tricks with flatland maneuvers and grinds. Hitting 100,000 points used to be a challenge, but with the Revert, players can easily chain together million-point combos. "The Revert fits right in," Zuniga says. "It's all about the player expression. Our job is to rebalance the scores. The High, Pro, and Sick score has to feel like a new reach."

Even though the game is now running at a constant 60 frames per second, Vicarious Visions insists the timing of the moves will be unaffected and should feel the same. The skaters themselves are one element of the experience that isn't a throwback. Yes, the same roster of skaters are returning, but their looks reflect the passage of time. They are all 20 years older, and even though many of them are in their 40s and 50s, many still skate and wanted their appearances to be updated.

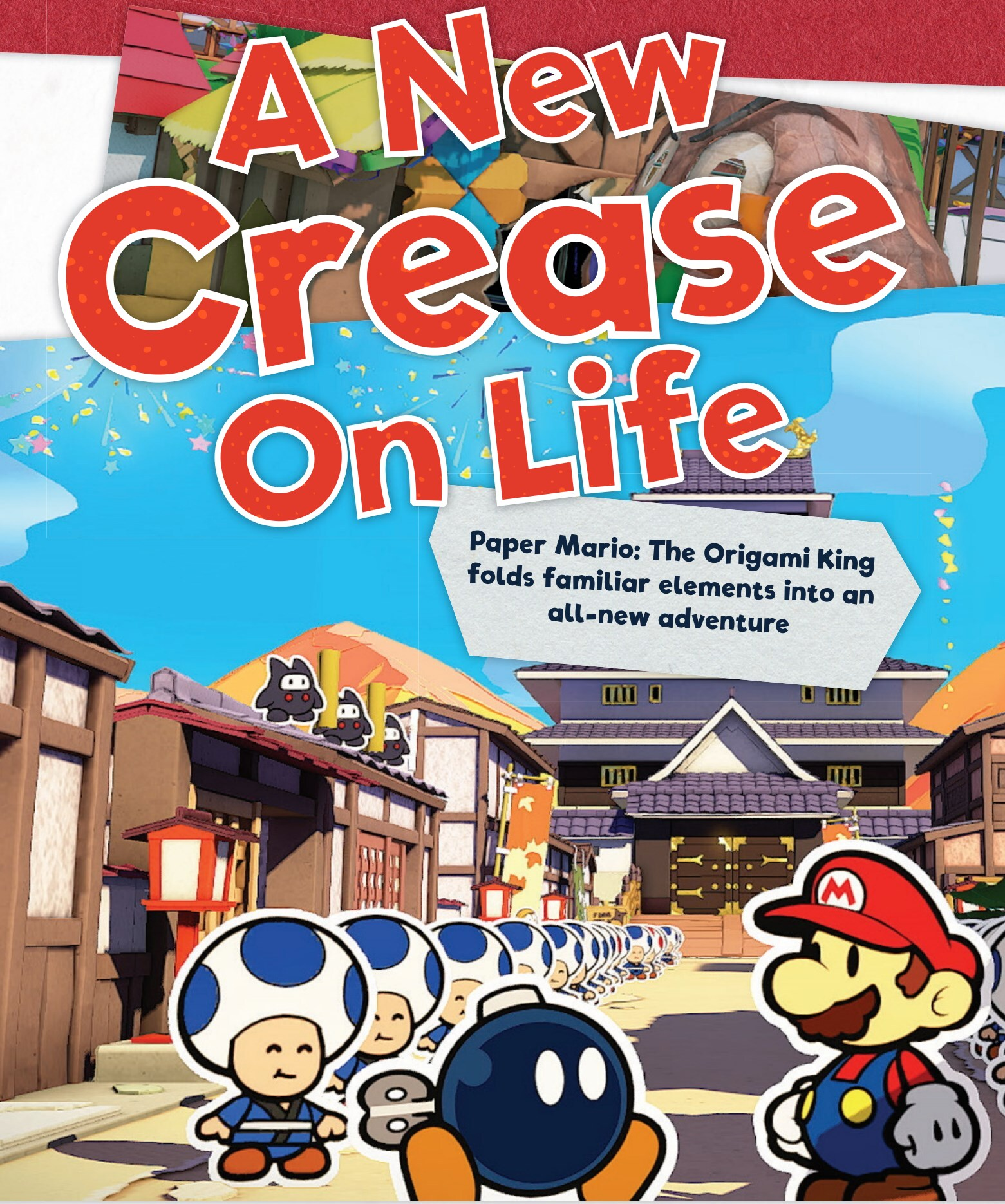
Their animations have also been overhauled to deliver more realistic bails, aerial tricks, and grinds. "I can't wait for you guys to bail for the first time on a vert trick and land on your knees," says Zuniga. "That's never been seen in the franchise, and that's just awesome to me."

I asked both Zuniga and Dobbie if the levels would have new lines and areas, and they sadly said they couldn't talk about new stuff right now. Zuniga did add that they didn't want to mess with the foundation of the levels, and if anything is added, it's piecemeal and players shouldn't expect any significant overhauls in any level other than a boost in visual fidelity.

Vicarious Visions wants Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 to feel as much like new experience as it is a throwback to the '90s. In this regard, Activision has been on a roll with its remaster collections, giving fans exactly what they wanted from the Crash Bandicoot and Spyro the Dragon games of old. The success of Crash Bandicoot remaster was so resounding that it breathed new life into the series, and led to the creation of the retro-designed Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time (see page 58). That's exactly what Tony Hawk hopes happens to the Pro Skater series – a blast from the past paving a new path the future.

A New Crease On Life

Paper Mario: The Origami King folds familiar elements into an all-new adventure



It all starts in a familiar way, with an invitation from Princess Peach. Toad Town is hosting a special origami festival, and Mario and Luigi are among the requested guests. Say no more! The brothers head out to the event, only to find that the ordinarily thriving town is virtually abandoned. Worse, Peach has been transformed: Her body has been reconfigured into an origami form, and her normally friendly personality replaced with a detached automaton.

Peach is among the latest victims of King Olly, the diabolical ruler of the Origami Kingdom. After she drops Mario into a dungeon, Olly wraps Peach's castle in five massive streamers and places it atop a far-away mountain. Fortunately, all is not lost. Mario meets Olivia, one of the few origami creations who isn't his enemy. Together, Mario and Olivia need to figure out how to unravel this plot and restore Toad Town and the rest of the land to its normal, flattened format — even helping a partially origami'd Bowser along the way.

That's the elevator pitch for Paper Mario: The Origami King, the latest entry in Nintendo's RPG series. It may be hard to believe, but Paper Mario is celebrating its 20th birthday this year. Over the course of that journey, players have become comfortable with a "Mario, but flat" conceit that, if you step back, is about as weird as it gets. The tone is often as strange as the paper-thin setup, too, with plenty of humor and silliness scattered throughout. The Origami King is building on the past, but is also taking the series in some new directions, including an interesting ring-battle system and the introduction of open-world levels you can traverse seamlessly.

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
July 17

by Jeff Cork

RING FIGHT ADVENTURE

"When continuing a game series, it's much easier to carry over the basics from an existing game system rather than building new systems for each new installment," says Kensuke Tanabe, producer at Nintendo. "But that's not how you create new experiences or unexpected surprises. As a game designer, I want to deliver new experiences and surprises to our fans, so I always challenge myself to create something new. To be sure, I will sometimes use the same system in a subsequent game to further develop that system until I feel it has reached its full potential. But my goal is to continue to tackle new challenges as much as possible."

This is a subject Tanabe knows a thing or two about. He worked on Super Mario RPG back in the Super Nintendo days, and has been involved with every game in the Paper Mario series since Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door released on GameCube in 2004. For the most part, combat has been consistent over the years, with turn-based battles that incorporate a little bit of timing. If you manage to hit your attack at the right moment, your attack will squeeze out some extra damage. It's fun, but Tanabe and the developers at Intelligent Systems wanted to push themselves further with this entry.

"Mr. Naohiko Aoyama, who is a member of the staff at Intelligent Systems and the director of the previous entry in the series, Paper Mario: Color Splash, asked for a battle system in which the enemies surround Mario to attack from all sides," Tanabe says. "That became our starting point when thinking about how the battles would work."

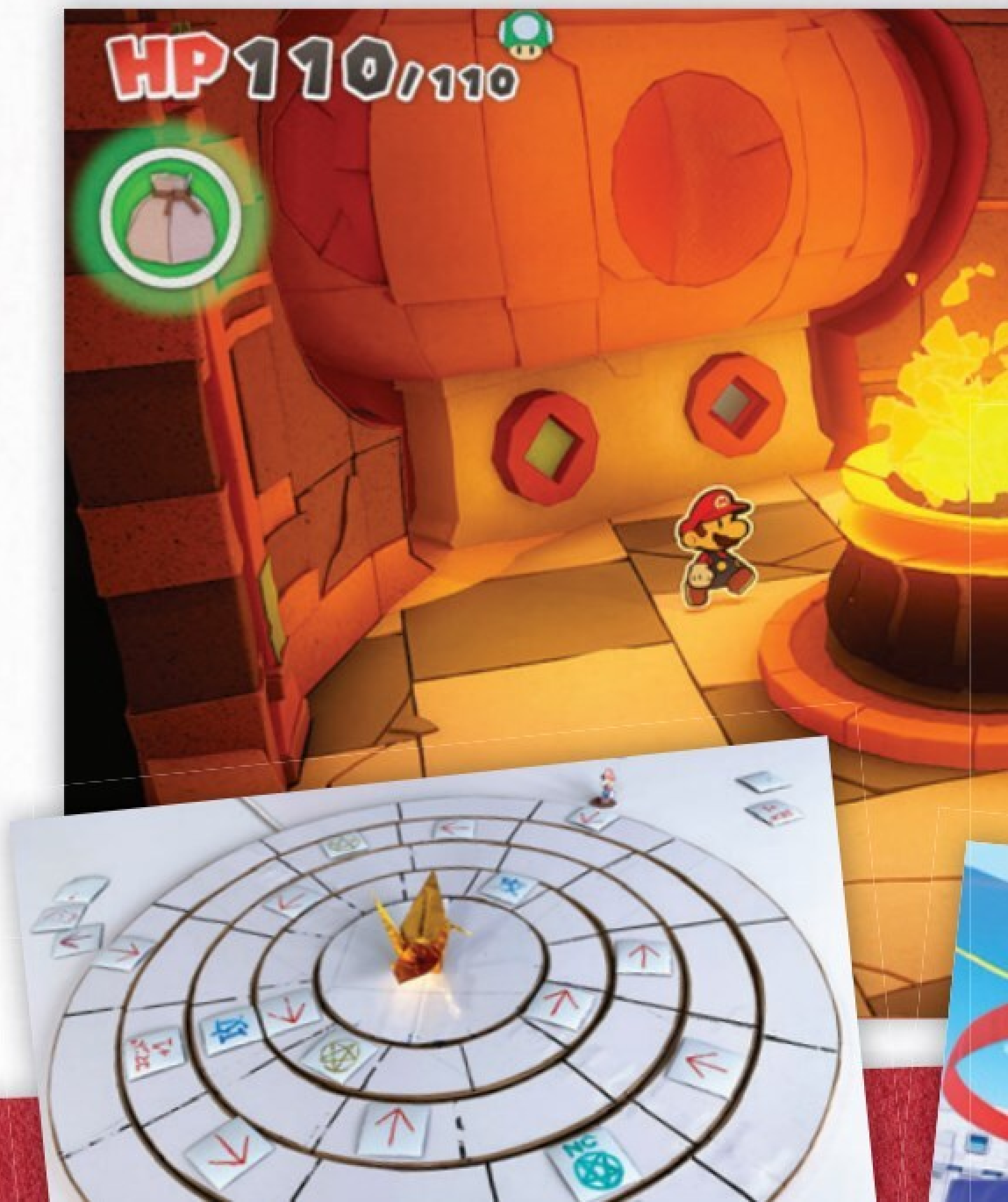
The designers thought about how best to reflect this feeling of being surrounded, and came up with an unusual take on a battle grid. Rather than setting the action on a traditional checkerboard, they arrived at something similar to the concentric rings and segments of a dartboard. Then players could rotate each of the concentric circles to line up attacks. But something was missing.

"We kept thinking about what to do, until one day an idea suddenly popped into my head while I was in the shower," Tanabe says. "The idea was based on a Rubik's Cube. It inspired me to add vertical rotations to the horizontal rotations, so we got the slide mechanic added to the program, and it worked well. That is the moment I was convinced we'd be able to build our battle system."

When combat begins, players have a set number of turns in the planning phase to optimize their positioning. The goal is to line enemies up in groups so that Mario can take them out efficiently. His stomp attack hits enemies lined up in a row, and his hammer deals more concentrated damage to groups of enemies that are standing side-by-side and one row deep. It's almost like a puzzle, with each combat scenario having an optimal solution. You can spend coins to purchase more time to think if you're running low on time, or your Toad friends can give you hints – provided you pay them. Even if you blow it on your first attempt, you can still rearrange the stragglers once both you and the enemies have taken turns.

Each of the five streamers encasing Peach's castle is guarded by a member of the Legion of Stationary, which are realistic depictions of familiar art supplies such as colored pencils, rubber bands, and tape. Tanabe says the team initially wanted to use the same basic battle system in these boss encounters, but they ran into a problem: Since you fight these bosses one at a time, you didn't have anything to line up.

"It occurred to us that one way to avoid introducing a different system would be for the boss battles to be the opposite of regular battles, with the boss in the center and Mario creating a route to the boss from the outside," Tanabe says. "I drew concentric circles on a whiteboard, put mock-ups of some panels using magnets with arrows and other things drawn on them so Ms. Risa Tabata [the assistant producer] and I could simulate how a battle would play out multiple times. We felt that we had gotten something pretty good out of that process, so I proposed it to Intelligent Systems."



A WORLD TO EXPLORE

These bosses aren't just waiting in one location for Mario to find them. Instead, they're scattered around the world. That creates a striking visual, as players can see the streamers far in the distance, while also giving them a hint as to where their next challenge lies. One of the biggest departures with The Origami King is that the story isn't chapter-focused as past games have been. Instead, players can travel from region to region seamlessly in an open-world setup.

"One major feature that makes the world where this adventure takes place special is that there are huge maps to explore at every turn," says Masahiko Magaya, director at Intelligent Systems. "Because the game is laid out this way, we were careful during the design phase to make sure there is always something in the player's field of vision to catch their attention."

Players can watch the scenery unfold through several modes of traversal. Mario can run around, but crossing major distances might get tiring. Fortunately for his feet, he can drive a boot-shaped car around (a nod to Super Mario Bros. 3's shoe power-up?) and pilot a boat. I also saw him aboard an airship, where he takes command of the ship's defenses to fire rockets at incoming paper planes.

That variety extends throughout the game. Players can expect to encounter lots of one-off activities and miscellaneous diversions. During his travels, Mario encounters a host of Toads who have been folded into different origami forms. Hitting them with his hammer reverts them back to their normal form, then several things can happen. They might return to Toad Town, restoring valuable services to the location, like selling items or opening the dock. The Toads may also join Mario in battle, watching from the sidelines and helping when asked (and paid). You can also go fishing, if you're looking for some downtime.

Mario doesn't do any of this alone. Olivia is a constant companion throughout the adventure, and other characters join and leave along the way. The shuffling cast is a function of the story, so players aren't deciding which allies to bring along.

"We never considered whether or not we should implement a party-based system like some other games," Tanabe says. "As we worked on Paper Mario: The Origami King, we decided we could create more memorable moments if Olivia and the other characters team up with Mario along the way. In other words, we first determine what elements are needed in a game and then figure out how to implement and program them. Bobby, the Bob-omb, was the first character we decided to include, and from there we chose the characters that would be the best fit for the events in each stage of the game. Bowser Jr. was an exception. The director, Mr. Masahiko Nagaya, personally had strong feelings about including a storyline where a son sets out to save his father, so in this case, we decided to include the character before deciding exactly what we would have him do."

With an interesting combat system and a larger world to explore, Paper Mario: The Origami King looks like a nice evolution for the series. There are certainly some elements that are foundational to Paper Mario, but it's great to see that Nintendo and Intelligent Systems are willing and able to color outside of the lines.

Paper Mario: The Origami King comes to the Nintendo Switch on July 17. ◆

HP 90/90
Ready

Madden NFL 21

The face of the franchise

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Sports
(6-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Tiburon

» Release
August 28

This is the end of the current console generation, and what does the Madden series have to show for it? While the series stabilized its features during this time, from the successful Ultimate Team to the online/offline Connected Careers franchise mode, morale among the fanbase is not high. Ultimate Team in particular stresses the fidelity of the gameplay with its predominance of money plays and frustrating, wonky gameplay moments. Connected Careers fans, meanwhile, are begging for a revamp of their favorite mode after years of incremental progress.

As Madden NFL 21 closes out the PlayStation 4/Xbox One generation and brings in a new one, it feels like the old generation isn't necessarily going out with a bang, nor are we seeing a massive reinvention to usher in the new one. The good news is that the series is progressing; I'm just not sure how far forward it's really pushing things in Madden 21.

Madden is based on branching animations, and from year to year the development team at EA Tiburon works to join myriad situational animations in ways that both look good and which obey the inputs of your controller and the game's physics. The actual results vary from tackle to tackle and catch to catch, and this year's focus seems to be in letting users transition in and out of multiple commands and animations without a pause, like a receiver going up to make a catch, coming down with the ball, and immediately dodging an incoming tackle. Actions around the goalline and first-down marker in particular create multiple animations as a ball-carrier stretching out the ball is combined with tacklers attempting to make the stop.

Changes to the right analog skill stick for both offensive and defensive players are related to these animation improvements, and it'll be interesting to see to what degree players can use their stick skills to influence events on the field. For instance, defensive rushing moves are now mapped to the right analog and not on the face buttons. Rushers have a finite amount of energy to perform these moves, and offensive linemen can learn the tendencies of how defenders rush the QB.

This kind of control and strategy is welcome, but their ultimate execution onscreen again comes down to the game's ability to pick, express, and resolve the correct animations – a process further complicated by the A.I. of each individual player involved. Even highly rated players have shown questionable intelligence in the past, so how situations take into account A.I., stick skills, and animations puts a big onus on everything being depicted and balanced correctly.

Speaking of balance, the game is adding 50 new superstar X-factor abilities designed to let star players differentiate themselves above and beyond the average NFL player through boosts to specific abilities such as being able to throw on the run without losing accuracy, for instance. Naturally, players capable of adding these were big in Ultimate Team, highlighting the nearly unwinnable situation the mode is in: The more powerful and valuable certain players become due to their abilities,

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ORUMARIYE

the more it can affect gameplay and the mode's community marketplace, but without increased player differentiation the mode becomes stale. More Ultimate Team details are coming before launch, and my guess is whatever else is being added for this year stokes the grinding toward new and better player cards without fundamentally changing the core experience – for better or worse.

Similarly, the Face of the Franchise player career mode hits its second year in Madden 21 with the subtitle Rise to Fame. This year's iteration adds the ability to be a wide receiver or running back as well as a QB, and it starts earlier when you're in high school. More storylines are being added to the mode, and I'd also like to see more work done on issues such as poor teammate A.I. and making you actually feel like you're a player on a team in the NFL.

At the time of this writing EA hasn't talked about the changes being planned for its Connected Careers franchise mode, and to what degree it does or doesn't leap forward is another bellwether moment for this year and the series as a whole. Fans of the mode have been waiting ages for improvements, such as an overhaul of its free agency period, and if the mode cannot make the investment in building their franchise worthwhile, they won't see much benefit in sinking in the time.

In May the NFL renewed its agreement with EA to give the company the exclusive rights for sim-based football through the 2025 season and possibly another year beyond. While it makes sense for the owners of NFL teams (who, along with the commissioner are the league) to rubber stamp an agreement that, to this point, has made them a lot of money, fans of the Madden series and football in general aren't concerned with these business matters – they just want a great game. The Madden series has the foundations to make that possible, but EA needs to deviate from the path it took this generation to become as game-changing as the NFL stars that grace its covers.
» Matthew Kato

Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time

A return to the PlayStation era

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action/ Platforming

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Toys for Bob

» **Release**
October 2

The success of 2017's Crash Bandicoot remaster created a whirlwind of excitement that is a little different than we normally see in games. It created excitement for the series, but people didn't just want a new Crash Bandicoot game; they wanted a new Crash Bandicoot game that played like the old PlayStation 1 games. That's exactly what developer Toys for Bob is delivering with Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time, a sequel that will hopefully feel like it was made decades ago.

Crash Bandicoot 4's story wastes no time retconning the series' mistakes. Through the magic of time travel, most of the Crash Bandicoot sequels never happened. This follow-up picks up right after the events of Crash Bandcioot: Warped, the last entry developed by Naughty Dog for PlayStation 1, with Neo Cortex, Dr. N. Tropy, and Uka Uka trapped on a faraway planet. In a clever narrative twist, this trio worked for decades to figure out a way to tear apart the fabric of space-time and return to the past.

True to the games of old, Crash Bandicoot 4 is broken up into short levels with varying points of view – some are side-scrolling, others have the camera positioned behind Crash or Coco, and a few revisit that iconic Indiana Jones "chase" moment of sprinting toward the screen to avoid being crushed by something big (in this case a tyrannosaurs rex). In each level the player is tasked to leap over pits, spin through crates to gobble up mangos, and do what they can to take out or avoid Cortex's forces. Following Naughty Dog's push to deliver new locomotion tricks in each sequel, developer Toys for Bob is giving the bandicoots the abilities to rail grind, wall run, and rope swing.

Cortex is also a playable character in specific levels that are designed just for him. You'll find these stages littered across the dimensional map. Cortex can't jump like the bandicoots, but can dash quickly forward and use other devices to aid him along the way. Other characters are also playable, but they won't be unveiled until closer to launch.

Another new wrinkle centers on the masks. In the past, Crash used Aku-Aku masks for protection. If he collected three of them in a level, he could turn invincible for a short period of time. in Crash Bandicoot 4, players will run into two new Quantum masks named Ika-Ika and Kupuna-Wa, both of which deal with time manipulation.

"In the classic games, once you touch a Nitro crate, you died," says Paul Yan, Toys for Bob's chief creative officer and co-studio head. "Using the Kupuna-Wa mask, she's able to slow things down so much that you are able to touch a Nitro crates and escape the explosion. The player will need to be strategic to determine when to use that power to get past those crates."

Yan also said that players are once again pushed to destroy every crate in the world (including TNT and Nitro) to unlock a gem. There will be more gems this time around, as well as secrets to unearth.

The scale of bosses is one area where Toys for Bob is going much larger than the original games, both in terms of the size of the enemies and the gameplay used to take them down. "We wanted to make these challenges humongous," adds Yan. "The bosses in the past were rather short and confined. We wanted to add new layers and stages of difficulty and the little things we do to puzzle out boss vulnerabilities. We want you to travel greater distances to accomplish those goals."

Toys for Bob is creating Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time as a love letter for fans of the old games. All of the things that made up the original trilogy have been analyzed, broken down, and expanded upon. Toys for Bob is developing this exciting sequel for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. When asked if the game could also travel to PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, Yan hesitated for a moment, and then said, "We'll be talking about that at a future date, but for now it's just PS4 and Xbox One." We don't have long to wait to return to the 1990s, as Activision and Toys for Bob are eyeing an October 2 release date for Crash Bandicoot 4. » **Andrew Reiner**

Samurai Jack: Battle Through Time

Gotta get back

Animation fans hardly need an introduction to the slick action styling of a samurai named Jack. Genndy Tartakovsky's stellar animated show told the tale of a time-traveling warrior's journey to take down a shapeshifting wizard named Aku. Each episode inevitably flung Jack into a test of his fighting skills and moral code, and the quietly intense battles always looked incredibly cool. Adult Swim is now attempting to revitalize the series with a new video game, and my early hands-on suggests that developer Soleil understands what makes the character so compelling, and gets back to some semblance of the thrill first encapsulated by the show.

The brief demo finds Jack escaping through a series of sewer tunnels in the distant future, on the run from the relentless Imakandi hunters first seen in the animated series. Gameplay is squarely focused on combat, as I move from one arena space to the next, fighting off robots and the occasional powerful Imakandi that catches up. The timing-focused exchanges demand quick dodges, blocks, and well-timed weapon attacks, and there's clearly an attempt to stay away from button mashing as a path to success. As I played through the demo, more than once I got greedy with my attacks, and Jack would get rapidly staggered by a series of counter-attacks, leading to a sudden drop in health. As his health goes down, much like in challenging moments from the show, Jack looks more beat-up and unkempt.

Different weapons are effective against certain enemy types, so there's a process of discovery as you roll through new encounters. Weapons degrade with use (except your standby magic sword), but upon destruction, they drop currency that helps with upgrades. Each weapon has its own set of moves, combining light and heavy attacks along with held button presses to enable different swings. The most satisfying assaults occurred when I began an attack with one weapon to reach close range, and then switched mid-combo (by tapping a direction on the d-pad) to a different weapon. In addition to melee options like a giant slow-moving kama and an electrically charged spear, Jack also has access to ranged weapons including bows and machine guns. Attacking from a distance is nearly essential to combat the high-flying robots that zip around the periphery of a battlefield.

While the demo is too brief to get a clear sense of Jack's progression, players have plenty of options to improve his repertoire. Physical, combat, and spiritual skills each have their own dedicated tree of upgrades to chase. You're also regularly picking up gold that allows for the purchase of buffing items or new weapons to replace those that have broken. The shopkeepers and other characters you meet along the path are also drawn from the existing fiction, so you can expect to see familiar faces like the Scotsman show up.

Creating a taut and responsive stylish action game is no small feat, and Samurai Jack: Battle Through Time still needs to tighten up the flow of fights and the timing around staggering. But as a longtime enthusiast for the incredible animated series, it's apparent that attention has been paid to nailing the look and feel, as the music and visual presentation ably match any expectations fans might have. If you've longed for just one more adventure with this honorable wanderer, this is one to keep an eye on. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Adult Swim Games

» **Developer**
Soleil

» **Release**
Summer

Destiny 2: Beyond Light

The start of something new

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Bungie

» Developer
Bungie

» Release
September 22

After an uncharacteristic period of silence regarding the upcoming major beats for Destiny 2, Bungie recently unveiled a broad-scope plan for the franchise, with details that stretch as far out as 2022. The current season of content is built around a transition for the franchise, but the first real steps into new territory are being reserved for Beyond Light in September. This content is primed to restructure large swaths of the way the game works, and also move toward long-teased conflicts that have been building since 2014.

Beyond Light takes Guardians to Jupiter's icy moon of Europa, a brand-new destination where a number of threats and discoveries await. Bungie has strongly implied that the nature of the Darkness that has threatened since the earliest days of the franchise may finally be revealed. In addition, players are forced to confront a new Fallen leader; Eramis is a Fallen Kell who once wielded the Light, just like the Guardians, and now she's begun to reunite the other Fallen.

Players also contend with a new raid set in the Deep Stone Crypt, a location deeply intertwined with the origin of the Exos, one of the playable races. Not coincidentally, Beyond Light also features the return of one of the most prominent Exo characters, the Stranger, who has not been seen since her departure in the closing moments of the original Destiny's base campaign.

Beyond Light introduces a fundamentally new power source called Stasis. Joining Arc, Solar, and Void, Stasis offers distinct powers for each class. Warlocks, Titans, and Hunters can wield it in unique ways, but the developer has held off on detailing those powers as of now. Unlike the original three elemental forces, this new Stasis power is rooted in Darkness, indicating that Beyond Light has the Guardians flirting with the very power they're fighting against. In the video that reveals the new power source, Stasis appears to have both freezing and time-alteration qualities.

Beyond Europa, the playable spaces of the universe are also seeing a dramatic overhaul thanks to a new approach that Bungie has called the Destiny Content Vault (DCV). Much as a Guardian vaults weapons they're not currently using, the DCV acts as a tool for Bungie to remove destinations that feel stale and replace them with new content and refreshed older locations, including places left behind in the original Destiny. In the fourth year of Destiny 2 that begins with the launch of Beyond Light, destinations going into the vault include Mercury, Io, Titan, and Mars. But the Cosmodrome from the original Destiny returns, along with the classic Vault of Glass raid and the new Europa destination, joining the Moon, Tangled Shore, Dreaming City, European Dead Zone, and Nessus as playable locales.

We have a lot more to learn about Beyond Light ahead of its launch on September 22, and at least some of those secrets seem set to unfold in the content rolling out right now as part of the current season, acting as a breadcrumb trail to the new expansion. But one of the most surprising announcements of all was Bungie's reveal of two subsequent expansions for the following years. The Witch Queen is set to arrive in 2021, followed by Lightfall in 2022 – intriguing names for anyone who has been following along with the lore. Bungie clearly has a long-term plan and narrative in place to usher players forward over the coming years. Now is as good a time as any to meet back up with your Ghost and discover Destiny's latest secrets. » **Matt Miller**

Project Cars 3

Room to grow

Flexibility has always been one of the important tenets of the Project Cars franchise. At first, it was nice just to have a series that gave you customization features like a bespoke HUD and weather progression, along with its various cars and racing series. But in the 2017 sequel and the upcoming third title, developer Slightly Mad Studios is not only layering on additions, but doing so in the spirit of the franchise.

Project Cars' career mode has never been its strong suit, and Project Cars 2 only nudged this aspect of the game forward slightly. For this new title, the career mode has received a big boost thanks to the inclusion of in-game credits (there are no microtransactions) that can be spent on car upgrades. Whether you want to own a fleet of cars or stick with a few favorites, they can be upgraded through the different tiers of racing performance so you don't have to leave them behind as you climb a curated ladder of events through 10 car classes.

Experience points and credits are won by completing various race objectives, and these are thankfully not restricted to just grabbing a podium finish. Hitting a certain speed, overtaking a minimum number of vehicles, and good driving confer rewards that move your career forward. Credits can also be used to unlock future events if you just want a change of pace from the current series you're racing in. Best of all, what you do in other areas of the game earns you XP and credits for your career – a welcome design decision in keeping with the series' spirit that doesn't cordon off the game's various modes.

Even if you're not the world's most dangerous racer, Project Cars 3's online multiplayer has incentives for you to try it out – even if it's only for XP and credits. The new Rivals MP mode joins the Quick Race (with multiple levels of matchmaking) and Scheduled Events online options to deliver daily, weekly, and monthly challenges. These are asynchronous, so you're not necessarily racing directly against others, but you are still pushing yourself to perform so you can earn better rewards. It's the kind of single-player online feature that titles like Madden and FIFA have included.

As good as Project Cars 3 sounds on paper, we haven't gotten our hands on the title to see what the cars feel like. I wasn't completely satisfied with different cars' handling in the last game, but Slightly Mad says it's been working on this aspect of the title, and in particular to make racing with a controller a better experience. Shoring up this and other gameplay areas such as smarter and more consistent driving by A.I. cars are important factors in judging exactly how far this series has come.

» **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(Online TBD)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Slightly Mad Studios

» **Release**
August 28

AMG
certsoil
GT
16

Ghostrunner

Revenge on the run

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
All in! Games

» Developer
One More Level

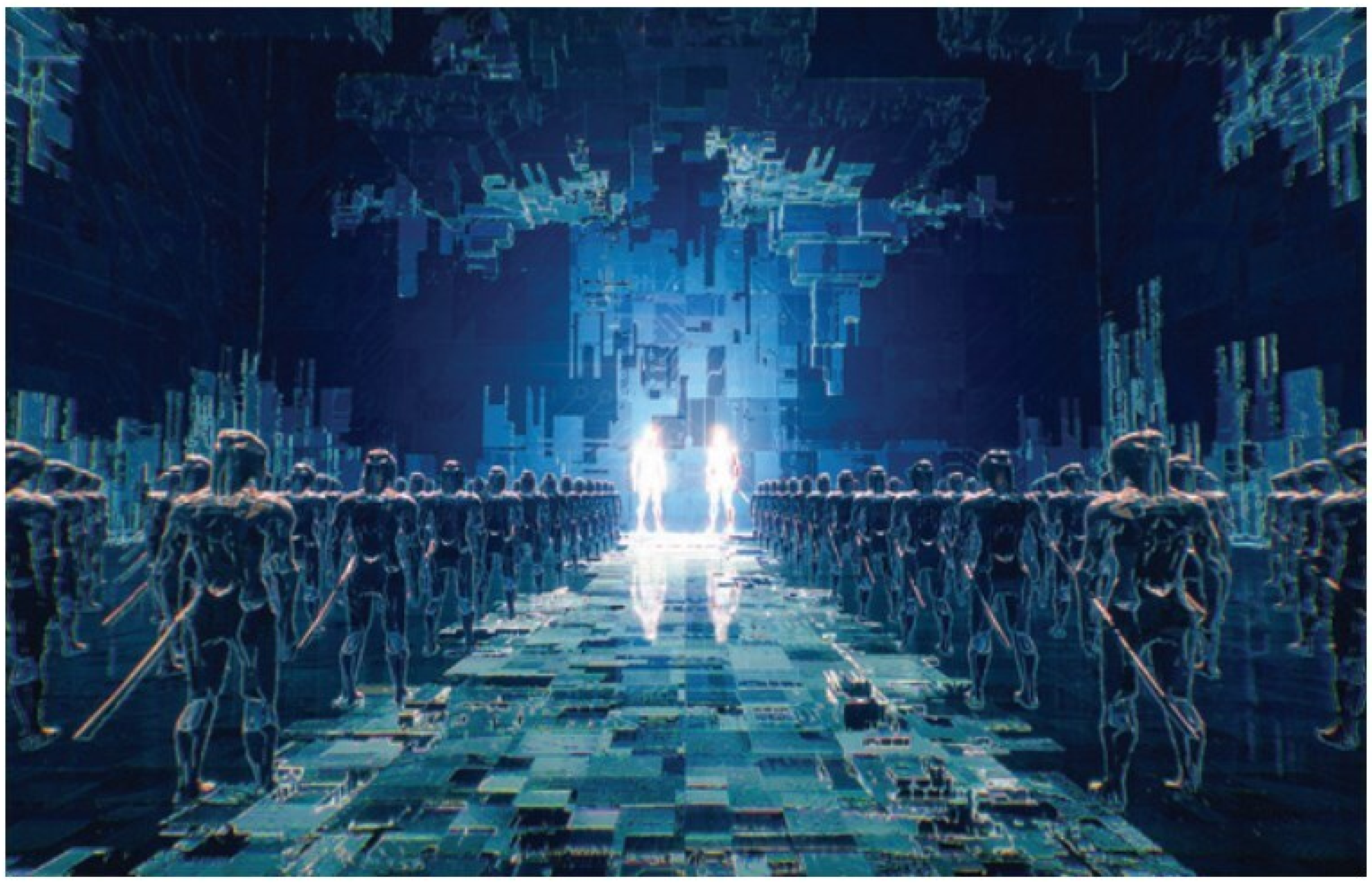
» Release
2020

The future is grim. The last remnants of humanity have sheltered inside a single tower-city that is ready to collapse under the weight of its violence, poverty, and chaos. You are a ghostrunner – a cybernetic warrior armed with only a high-tech blade. As you awake at the bottom of the tower with no memory of who you were, an A.I. voice calling itself the Architect urges you to climb the tower and assassinate the city's leader.

"The Architect was the creator of the ghostrunners, who are basically bodyguards, peacekeepers, and special forces," says narrative designer Jan Gąsior. "Twenty years ago, there was an uprising in which the Architect of the tower was killed by someone called the Keymaster. Now the Keymaster rules the tower with an iron fist, and the Architect's A.I. is using you to seek revenge."

While Ghostrunner's narrative caught our attention, its approach to first-person platforming really has us excited. Fans of games like Mirror's Edge and Titanfall 2 should be at home in this first-person parkour adventure, which puts a strong focus on speed as you dash through complicated urban environments and wall run over massive gaps. Using your katana, you can slice through any enemy that stands in your way. However, you need to plan your attacks carefully; some enemies can pin you down with rapid-fire attacks, and others carry shields that make them immune to frontal assaults.

Your ghostrunner has a few high-tech tools that make navigating each encounter a little easier. The first is an energized grappling hook that snaps you toward designated ledges.



Acceleration is a skill that lets you dash forward and cover short distances in the blink of an eye. Acceleration also allows you to briefly slow time in mid-air, making it easier to dodge enemy fire. Finally, a move call Tempest acts a bit like a Jedi's Force push, allowing you to knock enemies off ledges and reflect their projectiles back at them.

Ghostrunners are cybernetic warriors, which means their programming can be exploited. At designated points, you can overclock your software and temporarily extend the limits of your natural capabilities. For example, at one point in our demo, we encountered an area where we increased our ghostrunner's jumping ability and launched ourselves nearly 100 feet into the air. Overclocking your software is always temporary, but developer One More Level teased that there are multiple overclock abilities that are useful both in and out of combat.

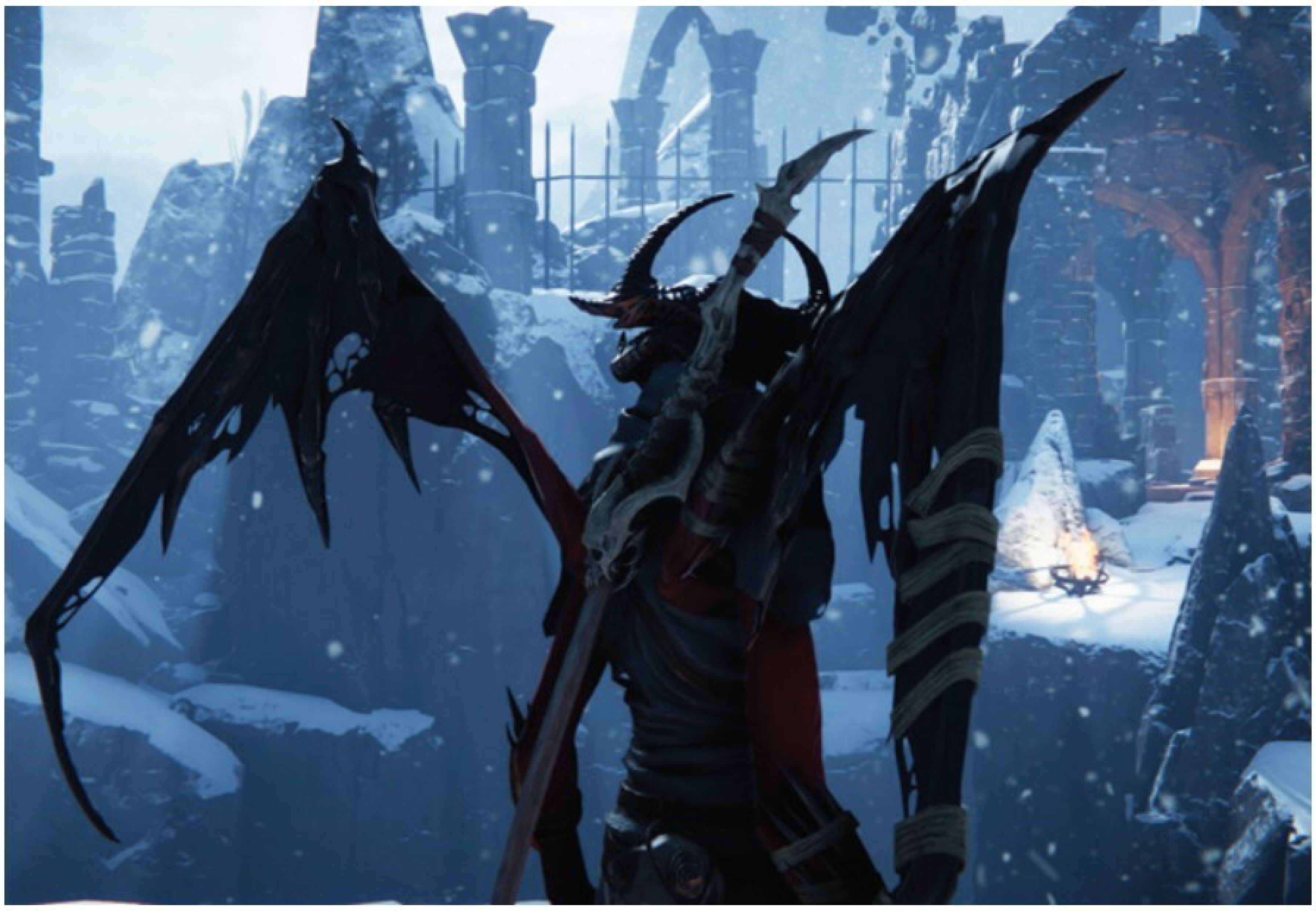
"With Ghostrunner, the core of combat is 'one hit, one kill,'" says game designer Radosław Ratusznik. "So the action is very fast, and the gameplay is great … but our environments are open, so you have to figure out the best way to go – the best solution for each room. We have plenty of checkpoints, so we're not trying to make players frustrated. Our game is hard, but players shouldn't be frustrated."

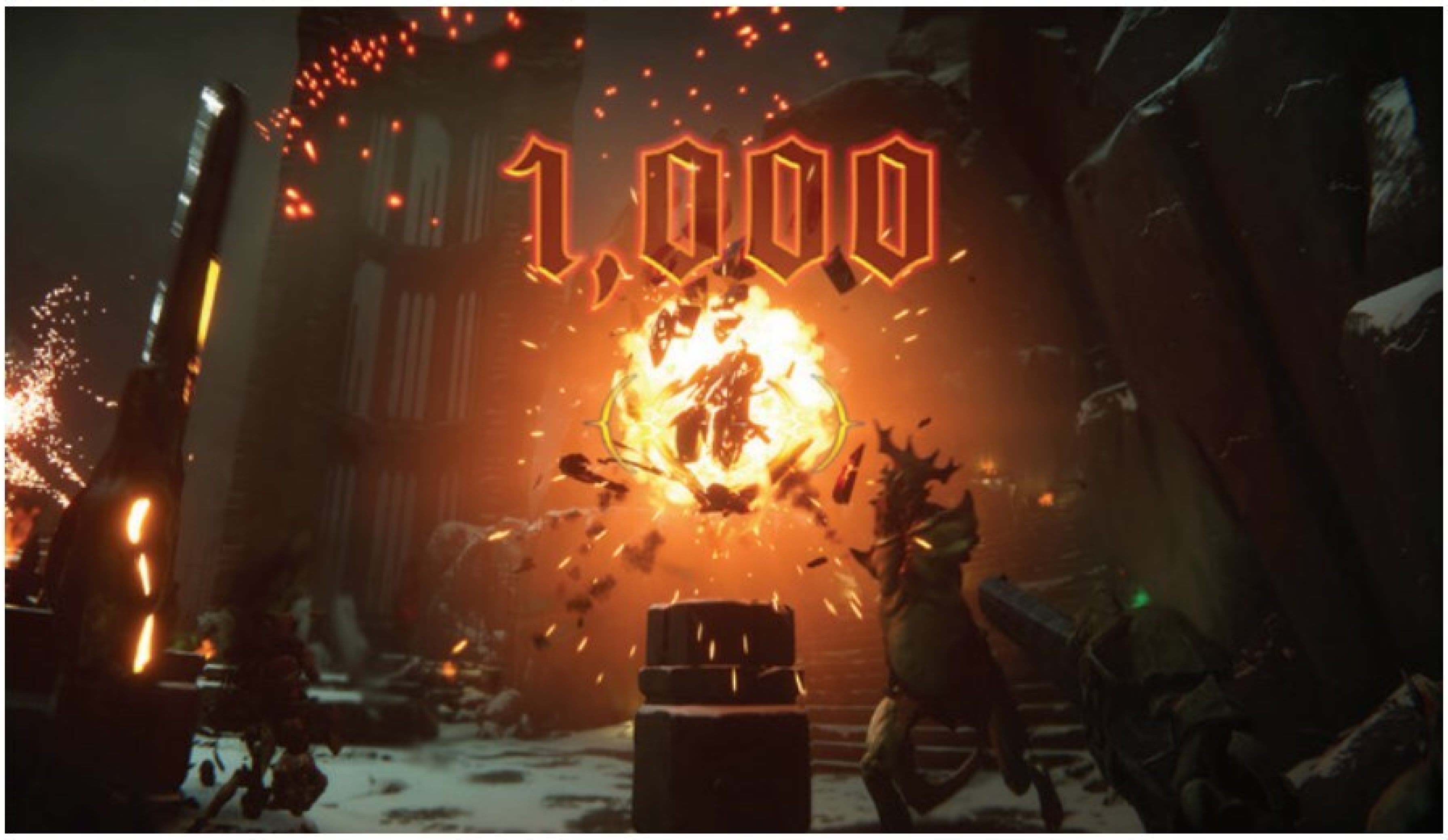
During Ghostrunner's opening levels, we were happy to see that it only takes a second for you to drop back into the action after each death. Ghostrunners' levels also feature multiple paths, which encourages experimentation during some of the harder combat encounters. The Ghostrunner demo offered a rewarding challenge, but the hardest part was putting down the controller and knowing we had to wait until later this year to play the rest.

» Ben Reeves

Metal: Hellsinger

Rocking rhythms





David Goldfarb and The Outsiders are taking you to Hell. You play a mysterious character that has issues with the current management of the abode of the damned, and it's time to wreak havoc on your way to dethroning those in power. Like many other first-person shooters, you acquire various weapons, rack up scorestreaks, and collect power ups as you move through each level.

The catch? It's all about beating up demons to the beat, as rhythmic shooting in sync with the pulsing tunes drive your score totals up and let you carve demons into pieces for bonus resources. The better you can nail the music, the more metal the tracks get, turning good play into a throbbing, thrashing, hell-smashing ride.

Each level has its own music to master, featuring music and vocals from prolific metal artists, like Matt Heafy of Trivium and Alissa White-Gluz of Arch Enemy. Original compositions by Elvira Björkman and Nicklas Hjertberg keep the hardcore experience flowing. Shotguns, pistols, and the ability to cut weakened demons in half with the press of a button round out your arsenal of attacks, battling all manner of foes from lesser demons to towering hulks that can hurl you around the stage.

Metal: Hellsinger will grace both current and next-gen platforms with its incendiary presence next year, as well as PC. We'll see if Hell can face the music then! » **Daniel Tack**

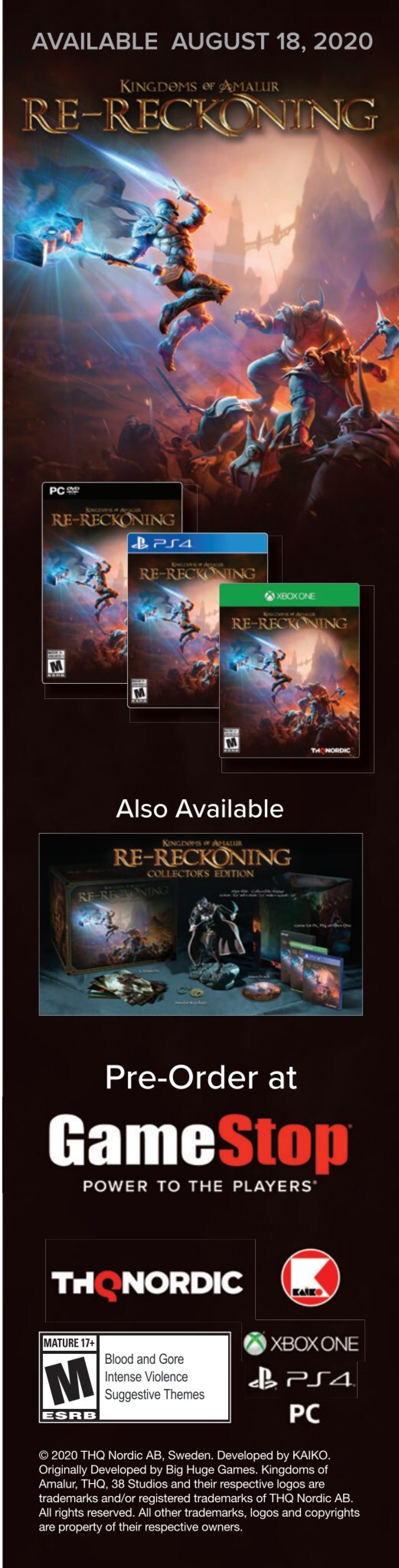
» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X
Xbox One • PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
Funcom

» **Developer**
The Outsiders

» **Release**
2021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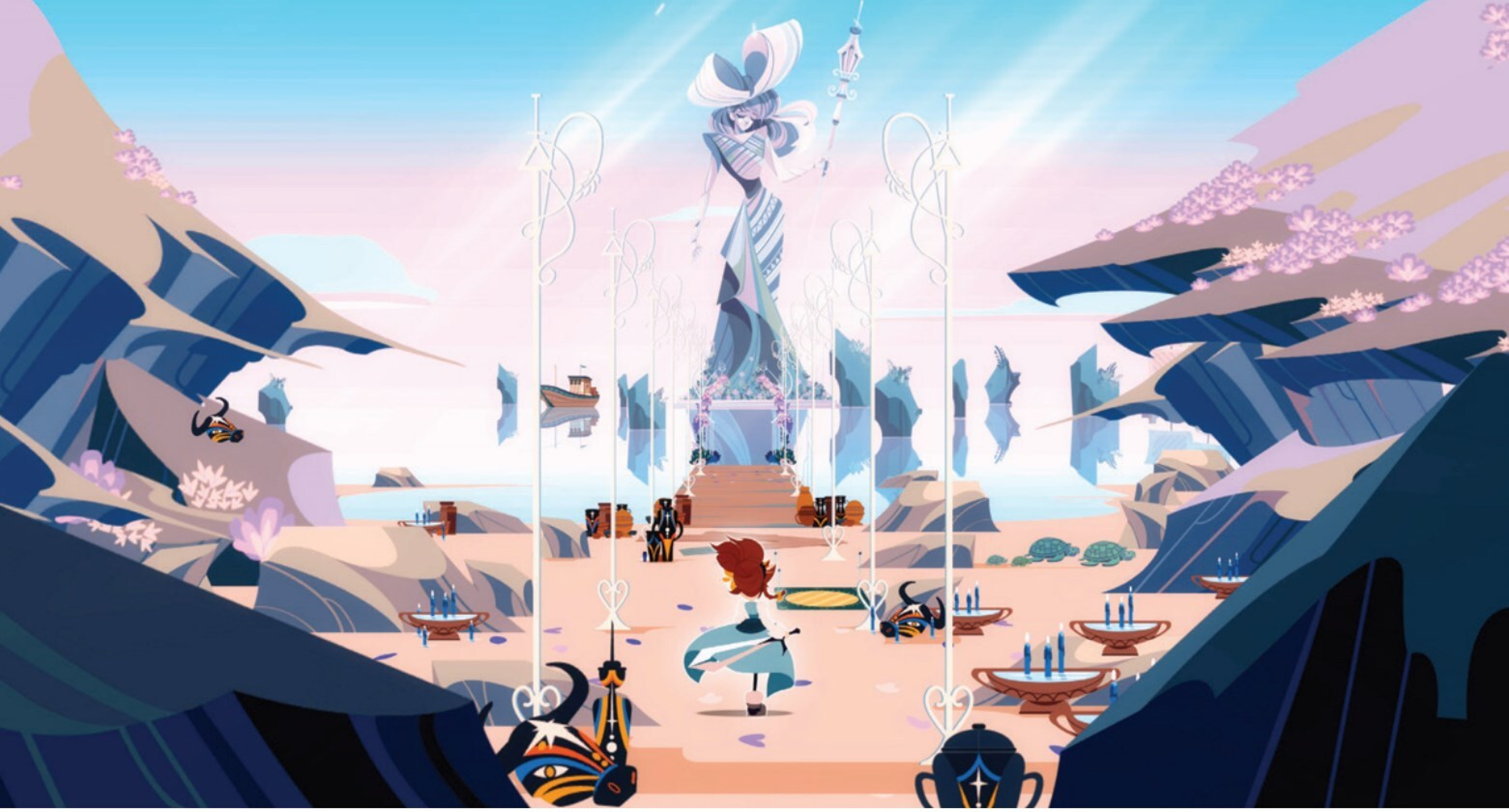


Cris Tales

Just a matter of time

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC • Stadia

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Modus Games

» Developer
Dreams Uncorporated,
SYCK

» Release
November 17

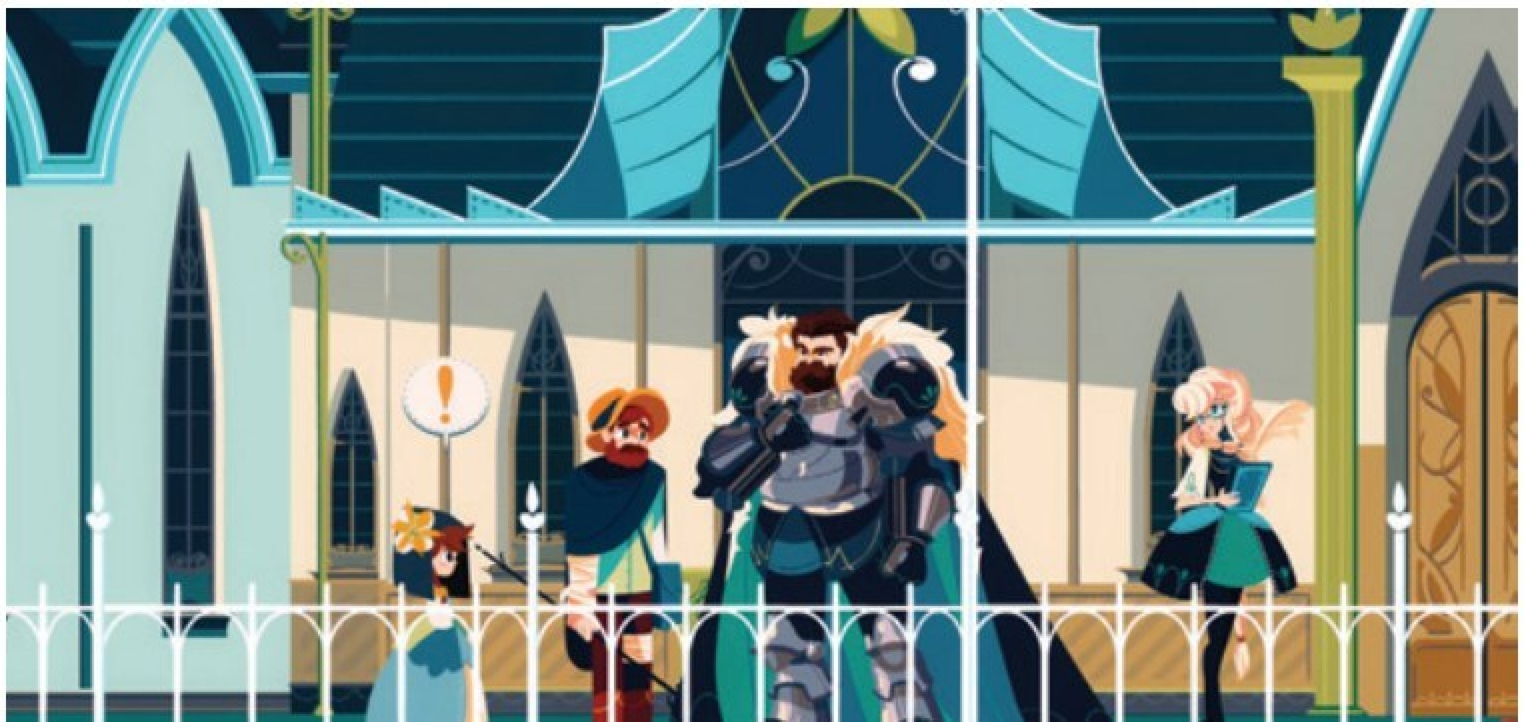
Though time is always marching forward, the bygone eras of gaming don't need to be forgotten. Cris Tales is a side-scrolling RPG that takes players for a stroll down memory lane with its turn-based combat inspired by classics like Chrono Trigger and Paper Mario. However, it also provides modern ideas like its inventive time-manipulation mechanics that affect the outcome of battles, side quests, and the narrative as a whole.

Cris Tales stars a time mage named Crisbell, so fiddling with the chronological continuum is at the core of the gameplay – a fact we witnessed firsthand during a demo led by publisher Modus Games. As you explore the gorgeous fantasy world, the screen is usually split into three sections; the left side shows the past, the middle is the present (where Crisbell and her companions reside), and the far right depicts the future. This setup allows you to get a broad view of various people and places in a matter of seconds.

For instance, we encounter a musician playing on a city street. As we walk by, the time panes scroll with us and show the musician in different eras. We see him in the past as a boy who was pursuing his passion at a young age, in the present as a man still trying to follow his dream, and in the future as a thief who has given up on music and resorted to a life of crime. That's hardly a happy ending; when you notice incongruities like that, it's often a hint to steer you toward side quests that can result in a better outcome for everyone. In this case, you can give the musician a hefty sum of money in the present, and that success is enough to keep him inspired. After that, the criminal version of him in the future is replaced by his older self still playing his music. The different locations you visit are peppered with variable circumstances like this, allowing you to shape fate as you like.

Combat is also all about using time to your advantage. The turn-based battles are governed by an action queue, with Crisbell and her companions performing spells and melee strikes in order. It isn't a passive process, though. Timing plays a role in how you attack and defend, so pressing a button at the right moment results in a follow-up attack that might apply a status effect, or allow you to block all negative effects from an enemy strike. But the real depth in battle comes from using Crisbell's time magic. In the demo, we saw her send a pack of wolves into the past. Her ally then applied a damage-over-time poison effect. On Crisbell's next turn, she propelled the wolves into the future, causing them to take the full force of the poison damage all at once. And that's just a simple example of how the mechanics work – complex boss encounters involve foes who can escape the bonds of Crissbell's magic or turn it against her, so don't expect a bunch of easy victories.

All of the battles and exploration are enhanced by Cris Tales' beautiful hand-drawn aesthetic and striking designs. With its fairy-tale vibe and classic RPG sensibilities, the whole experience aims to blend nostalgia for the past and excitement for the future in an adventure that pays homage to the greats while forging a unique path. » **Joe Juba**



The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel IV

Moving beyond Thors Academy

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
NIS America

» Developer
Nihon Falcom

» Release
October 27 (PS4), 2021 (Switch, PC)

Nihon Falcom's Trails of Cold Steel has been weaving a complex, bonkers storyline filled with startling revelations for the past three entries, even referencing threads from events that happened in its predecessor arc, Trails in the Sky. The last entry ended on a more somber note, leaving character fates in jeopardy and massive destruction to the world around them. NIS America, which brought us Cold Steel III, has already confirmed release plans for North America.

Trails of Cold Steel IV marks the final entry in this arc, and the stakes are the highest they've ever been. "The Erebonian Empire is once again making a push towards war and Rean's companions' circumstances are even more severe," says Nihon Falcom president and producer Toshihiro Kondo. We still control protagonist Rean, who we've watched graduate from student to professor at Thors Military Academy, but much like Cold Steel II, he'll be separated from the group at the start of the story.

Due to the events of the last game, this entry will not have the series' standard school setting, but expect the biggest cast and most quests yet, accompanied by some gameplay additions. "Aside from Rean, other members of the Thors Branch Campus will be able to call upon Panzer Soldats," Kondo says. "Players will also be able to use powerful Lost Arts, which are from an ancient age and have various affinities. Using these are at the expense of a full EP gauge, but their power is unmatched."

Trails of Cold Steel IV promises long-awaited answers to lingering questions and reunions with many familiar faces. Kondo said the team made sure to go all-out to ensure it's a memorable and satisfying conclusion: "We've hinted at various mysteries since Trails in the Sky, and all of those related to the Erebonian Empire will be revealed here. Additionally, characters who have made appearances in previous games will cooperate with Rean and his companions here against a common, final enemy. Many characters will join the party and you could say that the final swell in this grand tale is unlike anything ever seen thus far in any JRPG." » **Kimberley Wallace**

Good Company

A well-oiled machine

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
The Irregular Corporation

» Developer
Chasing Carrots

» Release
Fall

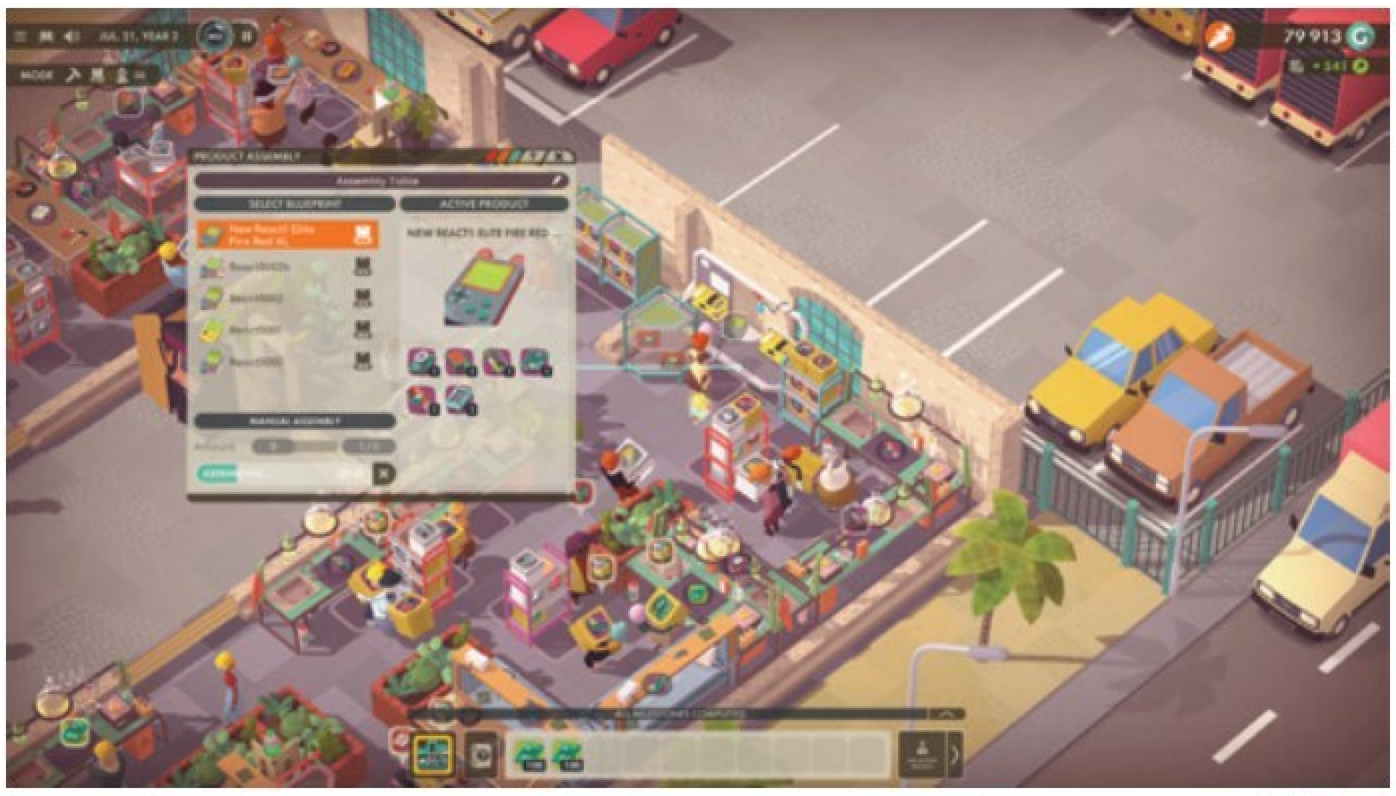
Players usually have a lot of responsibility in games. From hunting sewer rats to saving the world, your character needs to personally handle every crisis and chore. However, Good Company doesn't measure your success by what you accomplish yourself; this business-management sim is all about automation, which means setting up efficient processes that minimize the need for your own intervention.

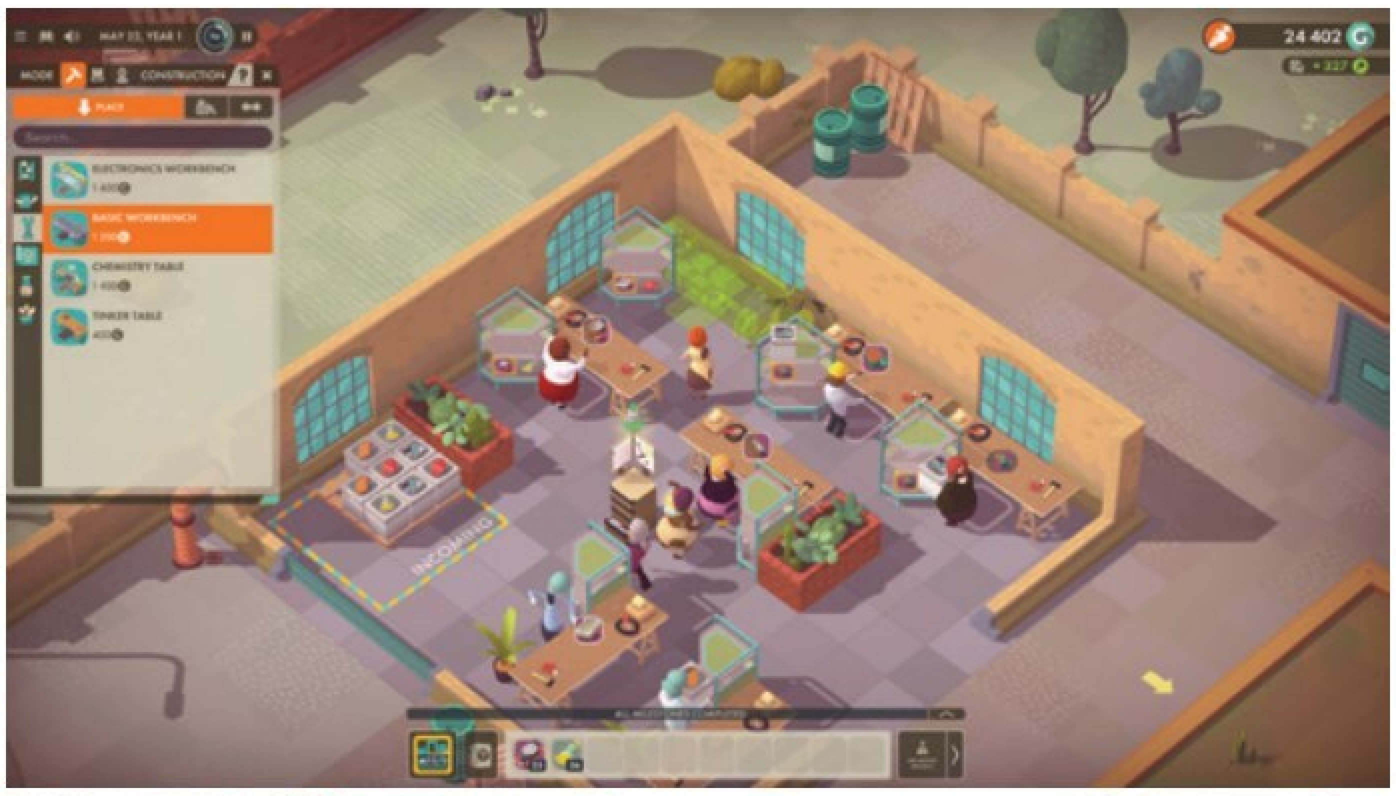
I played a few hours of Good Company (it's currently available in early access), and it definitely appeals to the part of my brain that loves optimization. Developer Chasing Carrots puts players in charge of an electronics company, where the goal is to set up a production line that takes raw materials and converts them into different components, then assembles those components into more complex products. You start small by building simple calculators in a small warehouse, but with some time and experimentation, you ramp up to full robot production across multiple factory buildings.

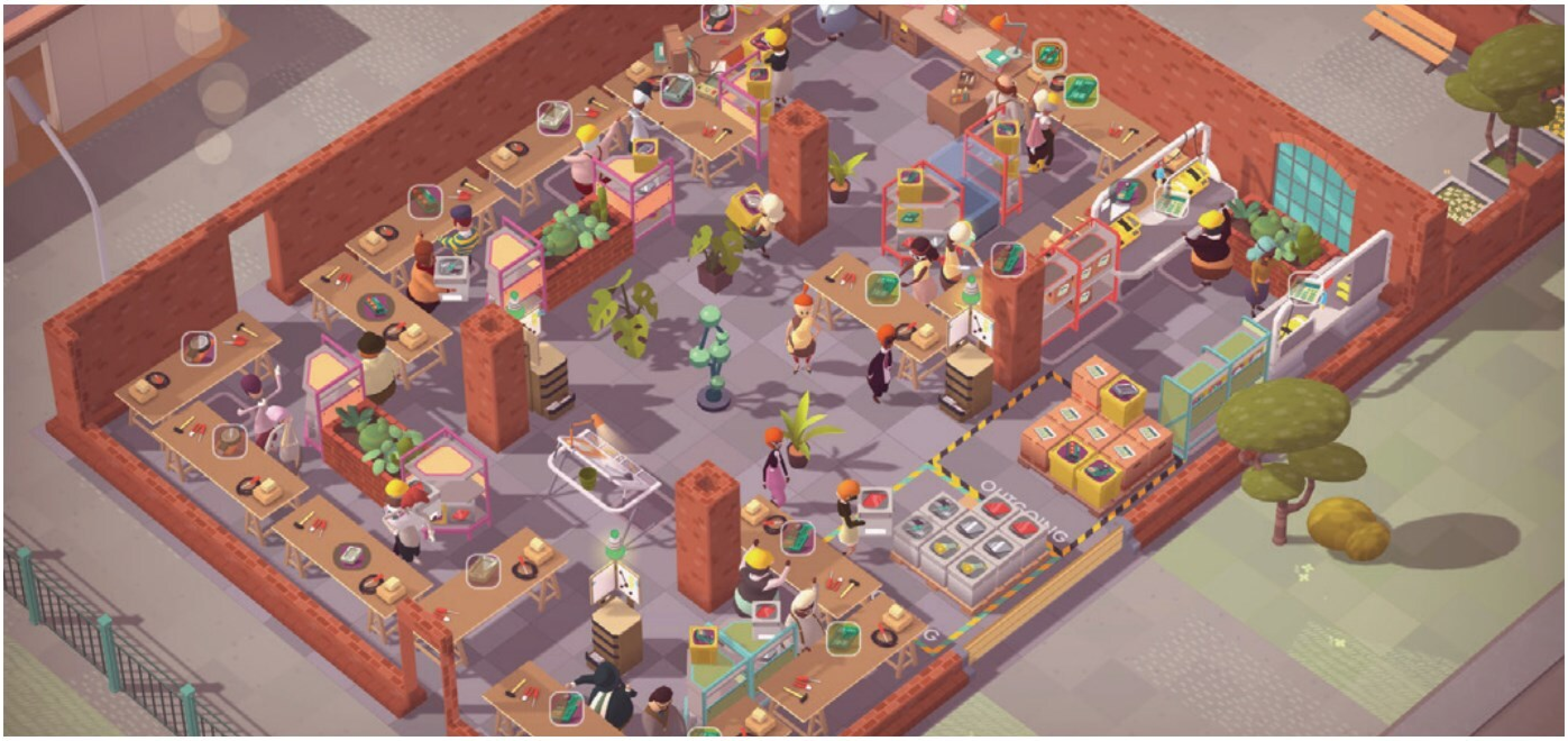
Though you have an avatar who can perform tasks on the ground, the biggest impact you make on your company happens in menus. You place crafting stations and decide what they produce. You hire your staff. You design your products to hit a sweet spot of functionality and cost effectiveness. After all of those basic pieces are in place, you dive into a logistical layer to make connections between all of your processes. Which shelves should your materials be taken to? Where should your workers carry the finished components? Setting these priorities can get pretty granular, but after making the necessary links you get the satisfaction of sitting back to watch your business hum along and your profits grow.

You can also create your empire from scratch in the free-play mode, though that could be overwhelming without first getting your bearings. Instead, you should start with the campaign levels, since they give you specific goals and function like tutorials (even though they are fun to play beyond their instructional value). Regardless of how you're playing, everything is presented with a simple-but-charming visual style and an industrious soundtrack; the overall aesthetic is pleasant and relaxing, even as your employees scramble around to complete their assigned tasks.

Good Company's interface handles the complex systems surprisingly well, with only a few hitches and bugs holding things up. The game first hit early access in March, and Chasing Carrots has already fixed issues and made quality-of-life improvements. Even more features and additions (like co-op) are planned as the game approaches its full release later this year, so Good Company's stock seems to be on the rise. » **Joe Juba**







PGA Tour 2K21

A bag full of your favorite clubs

HB Studios' The Golf Club series is now being published by 2K under the PGA Tour 2K moniker. But despite 2K's image as a company that does things the traditional way, HB Studios says it is keeping the features that got it this far intact.

The Golf Club series built its reputation on its course creator feature, as well as its analog-based gameplay. The latter was notable because it didn't rely on a player-upgrade system. When you sank a putt it was because of your stick skills, not your golfer's putting rating.

Past Golf Club titles – in part due to the lack of a player-upgrade system – struggled with generating a loop that pushed players forward. Hopefully this year's big influx of gear and clothing brands helps fill this gap, as well as the real-life golfers to go up against as you move up the career ladder.

Going up against pros like cover star Justin Thomas as you play in the official tour brings up the question of whether the gameplay is tight enough to serve players against these better golfers since players won't have a way to upgrade themselves to rise to the occasion. The game has different club sets that allow for more distance on their shots at the cost of demanding more accuracy on players' right analog swinging, but HB Studios will have to continue to work on the game's fidelity of the mechanic, as there have been complaints about swing choppiness depending on users' controller/platform setup.

As for the course creator, we'll have to see what's been changed beyond quality-of-life improvements and additional items, which is what we should expect at a minimum. Similarly, the golf societies, where you can assemble with friends and strangers alike to form online clubs, should benefit from this year's influx of brands, but hopefully this is just the first step to invigorating an intriguing aspect of the game which hasn't grown much since its inception in The Golf Club 2.

Golfers don't like to tinker too much with the swing that has gotten them success, and HB Studios is going to have to walk this fine line as it looks to improve its game. » **Matthew Kato**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Sports
(Online TBD)

» Publisher
2K Sports

» Developer
HB Studios

» Release
Summer

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Maquette

Exploring worlds within worlds

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1- Player Puzzle

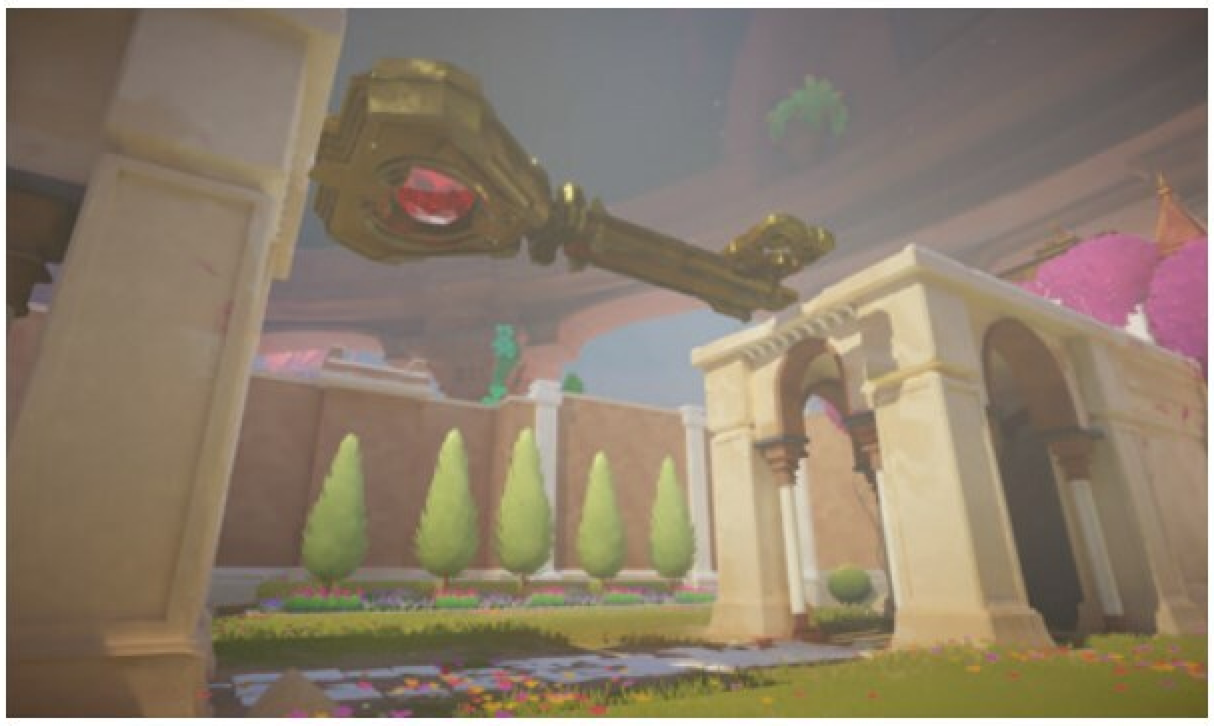
» **Publisher**
Annapurna Interactive

» **Developer**
Graceful Decay

» **Release**
TBA

For centuries, artists and architects have used scale models to refine the design of many of the world's most renowned works of art. These maquettes are often used to visualize massive structures and test radical design ideas. Graceful Decay's upcoming indie game of the same name also experiments with a few radical ideas, namely a clever perspective-based puzzle mechanic centered around a recursive world within a world … within a world.

During Maquette's opening sequence, you wander through a lush garden full of vibrant colors before entering a small cluster of buildings. At the center of these buildings is a large platform that houses a maquette, which is a scale model of the environment you inhabit. The heart of Maquette's gameplay centers around manipulating this model to affect the world around you. Any changes you make to the model in front of you are replicated on a grand scale on their life-sized counterparts.



For example, at one point, I drop a block into the maquette. As soon as the block touches the ground, I hear a massive thud behind me as a building-sized version drops into a position that corresponds with the smaller block in the maquette.

I love games that play with perspective and allow you to alter the size of objects, and Maquette's magic model is a two-way portal. When I drop a massive golden ticket on the ground in my world, a smaller version appears inside the model. Thankfully, these perspective tricks have some practical uses, which I discover when I strategically place a tiny key into the maquette, using it to bridge two buildings together. Then, in the full-sized world, I walk across its giant metal brother to cross the gap.

"In the second chapter, you discover the Maquette Dome in a normal-sized world, but with a tiny version of the world inside it," says game director and creative director Hanford Lemoore. "However, if you look up, you'll notice there's an even bigger dome overhead, with a massive version of the world around you. As players progress through the game they'll explore that larger world as well, and the challenges will really get players thinking about how to use the small, normal, and large levels of recursion together to overcome obstacles. Maquette is the type of puzzle game where once you solve a puzzle, the solution becomes a tool in your arsenal."

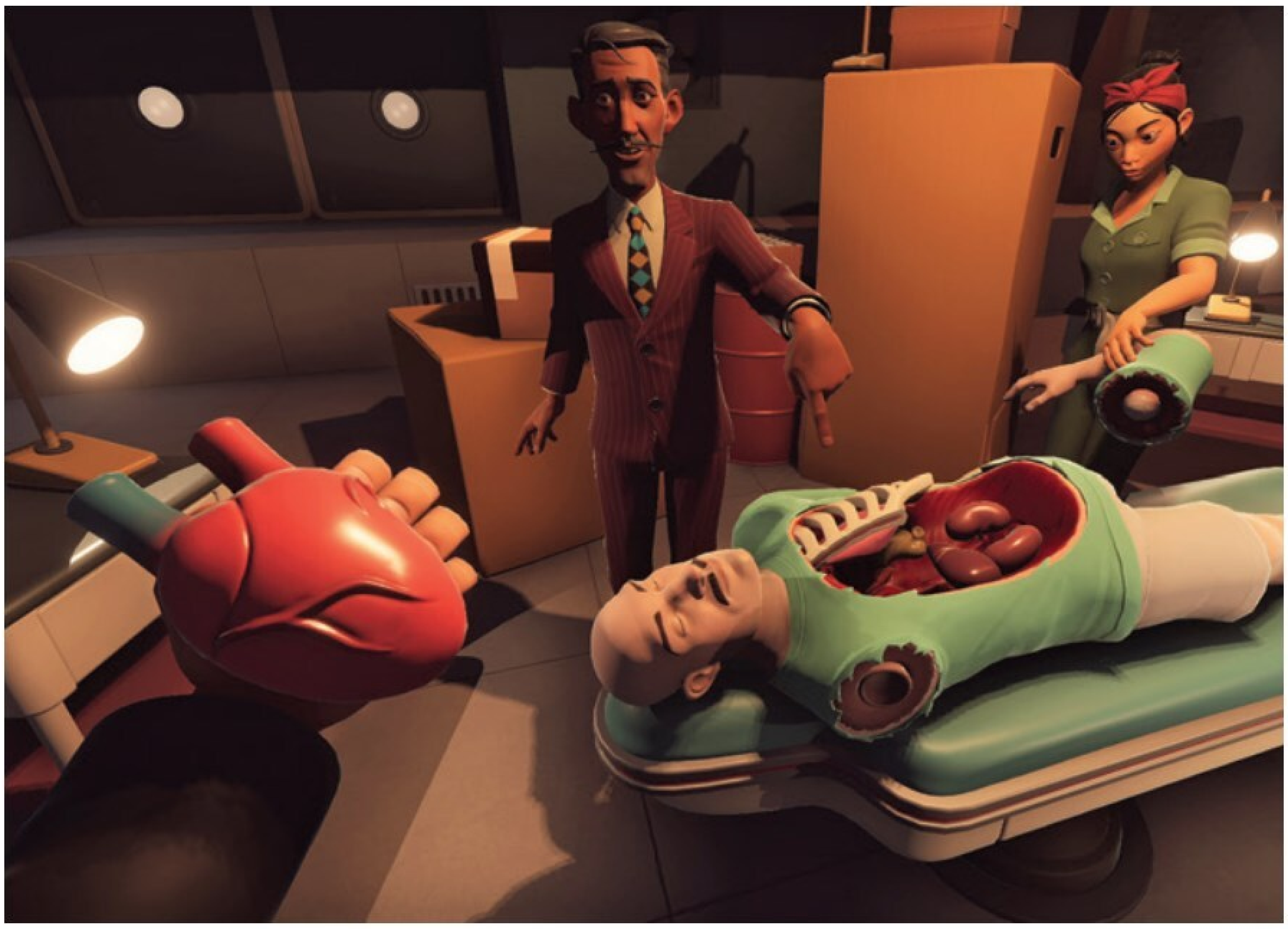
Maquette's reality-warping journey is occasionally interrupted with voiceovers conversations. These sequences are reflections or memories of past events that tell the story of a budding relationship between a young couple. The disembodied narrator talks about his first encounter with a young woman at a coffee shop and their subsequent first date at a carnival. However, when the young man looks into a fortune-telling machine at the fair, he receives a mysterious, foreboding fortune, leaving us to wonder if this love story will find a happy ending.

"Maquette's narrative is basically a modern love story," says Lemoore. "It follows the timeline of Kenzie and Michael – how they meet, how two individuals come together to share a life, and the ups and downs that come with that. There are natural emotional beats to a good love story, which is why these stories have been told countless times. While it initially seemed impossible to marry a love story to a hardcore puzzle game, it turned out to be the missing ingredient."

Maquette originally debuted at GDC 2011 during an experimental gameplay showcase, where it turned a lot of heads. Since then, Lemoore has tinkered on the project for years, continuing to find new twists to an already clever gameplay mechanic. Graceful Decay's recent PAX East demo was all too short, but we quickly fell in love with its recursive world and puzzle design. Hopefully, Lemoore's other reality-warping ideas continue to impress, because we want to find out how this love story ends. » **Ben Reeves**

Surgeon Simulator 2

Brain-dead surgery



The original Surgeon Simulator was a pioneer in the clumsy sim space – a genre that tasks players with completing somewhat mundane or routine tasks while contending with intentionally awkward control schemes. In Surgeon Simulator, players manipulated a surgeon's arm through several increasingly risky medical procedures. Thanks to its cumbersome interface, players were often as likely to cut off a patient's limb as they were to perform a flawless procedure. However, a dash of chaotic physics and cartoonish visuals lent Surgeon Simulator's life-threatening antics a sense of carefree glee.

As in the first game, players still complete a variety of surgical procedures, such as amputating limbs or transplanting hearts. However, in Surgeon Simulator 2 players also have to solve environmental puzzles and navigate simple environmental barriers before they even enter the O.R. During one opening level, I explored a maze of hospital corridors in search of a keycard to unlock the operating room. Surgeon Simulator's controls are a bit awkward, and it took me a few minutes to complete simple tasks, such as picking up a syringe and injecting my patient. Still, I couldn't help but laugh as I fumbled with my tools and knocked over a nearby rack of medical equipment.

While the original Surgeon Simulator included a multiplayer mode that let a second player control the doctor's other hand, Surgeon Simulator 2's multiplayer lets up to four players control their own doctor. Having that many gloved hands in the operating room is a little chaotic, but the results are often hilarious.

When you and your friends are done with Bossa's set of premade story missions, you can work together to design your own levels in Creation Mode. Bossa says it has already seen a wild assortment of creative levels that range from from a two-player time attack, to a team-based basketball game, to a diorama based on *Alice in Wonderland*. Once you've completed your masterpiece, you can upload it onto Bossa's hosting service where you can also rate and review other fan-made content. If all this content is as creative as it sounds, hapless medical professionals should have an endless stream of surgeries to perform when Surgeon Simulator 2 releases in August. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bossa Studios

» **Developer**
Bossa Studios

» **Release**
August

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Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Content
Strong Language
Use of Drugs
DEEP SILVER

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 327

76 The Last Of Us Part II

It may have ruined cities and legions of zombie-like Infected, but The Last of Us Part II isn't a typical post-apocalyptic game. Continuing the story of Joel and Ellie, Naughty Dog skillfully uses its bleak setting to explore broader questions dealing with love, violence, and perspective. With these powerful themes running through the experience at every level, The Last of Us Part II is a narrative masterpiece that sets a new bar for interactive storytelling.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	People who think ducks aren't farm animals.

Maneater

King of the sea

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Tripwire Interactive **Developer** Tripwire Interactive **Release** May 22 **Rating** M

Seals dart playfully in the ocean waters as sunbathers crowd the beaches to relax in the golden sands. For the bull shark that lurks in the dark waters below, this idyllic scene is a lunch buffet. With an insatiable hunger driving its actions, the shark devours the seals and humans, turning the ocean and sands red. Nothing is safe from this killing machine in the sea or on land. The shark needs to feast to grow large enough to exact revenge on the human hunter that killed her mother.

This is Maneater, an open-water RPG by Tripwire Interactive that puts you in control of an enraged bull shark. This experience is dark and violent, but also surprisingly fun, delivering big laughs, a nice progression system, and plenty of visual variety in the six to eight hours it takes to grow from a baby that feeds on catfish to a legendary mega shark that can leap from the water and crush hunting barges.

The shark's journey to adulthood is cleverly presented as a reality show that does a great job fleshing out the antagonist, a hunter named Scaly Pete who ripped the baby bull shark from her mother's womb. Before tossing the baby to the sea, Pete cut her with a knife to create a scar he would recognize years later when the shark would be large enough to hunt. When the hunters aren't telling their stories in front of a camera, the shark's life is periodically told through short narrative bursts by actor Chris Parnell. He does a fine job, but you don't hear enough from him to truly sell the vision of the shark being recorded for a show.

The entire focus of the game is to eat. From the moment you gain control of the baby, you need to consume everything you see, be it fish, turtles, or even license plates. Everything you consume gives you experience points. The smaller snacks give you less, but if you are feeling lucky, you can take on a high-level alligator for a huge haul of XP. The shark grows as she levels up, and also evolves in unexpected ways.

You eventually earn electricity coursing through your teeth, bone armor on your fins, and enhanced eyes that help you see more of the ocean's secrets. These upgrades are silly in concept, but they help sell the idea of this bull shark being unique and capable of being the king of the sea.

The shark is easy to control when she's swimming through open waters and even in tight caverns, but acts like an uncontrollable wrecking ball in combat situations. As she tries to keep track of her target, which can dodge and dart all over the place, her teeth gnash wildly, sometimes hitting flesh, most times catching nothing but water. Boss battles against orcas and sperm whales that have huge health meters end up looking like a chaotic mess – dogfighting at super speed.

Yes, it is annoying that even with a lock-on you lose track of your target so often, but the battles are rarely challenging. You just have to stick with your target, disengage to eat when your health gets low, then return to the chaos. You don't have much of an arsenal to work with, just chomping, a tail whip to stun enemies, a dodge roll, and more chomping. The lack of variety in the move set isn't that big of a detractor, however, as the amusement of eating everything possible doesn't lose its bite.

For a game about a shark, you also spend a surprising amount of time out of water, leaping over walls, soaring to nab collectibles out of the air, or beaching yourself to feed on humans. If there are homes or streets next to water, the shark explores them as you consume humans from within their safe zones. This action is handled extremely well, allowing the shark to bounce along the ground and lunge at people. They run away, but not very well. When the shark is fully leveled, a good 15 humans can be digested before needing to return to the sea before suffocating.

The world is divided up into themed areas, starting with a swamp and ending with the great depths of the ocean. Each area brings different species to eat, wildly different viewpoints both above and below the water, and a handful of missions. These assignments don't have much variety or meat on their bones; you basically need to eat 10 of one thing, kill as many humans as possible, and then take on the apex predators of the area, which are basically the boss fights.

One of my favorite parts of this experience is tracking down landmarks, which brings a fair bit of humor, some great pop-culture references, and cool visuals. Each landmark is accompanied by a little voiceover from Parnell who tells you what it is.

There are dozens to track down, one of which is the mafia's underwater burial ground (you even get to take down the mafia here), and another shows you the vent where Godzilla comes from. I even found a cave that held Pennywise the clown.

Maneater is an enjoyable hunt that satisfies in its shark mayhem and story of revenge. The action is a bit repetitive and chaotic, but the goofiness of the violence ends up winning out. This is the first shark game I've truly enjoyed. It has cult classic written all over it.

» **Andrew Reiner**

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Play as a shark and eat everything you can so you can get revenge on the hunter that killed your mom

» **Graphics**
The world above and below the sea has a lot of style to soak in. The bull shark and bosses also have a cool, unique flair to them

» **Sound**
The underwater sound effects for action are a bit cheesy, and the voice of Chris Parnell is underutilized

» **Playability**
Combat is loose, chaotic, and hard to decipher – but biting hapless humans sure is amusing

» **Entertainment**
Maneater is weird, different, and just flat-out fun. I had to see where this story was going and I thoroughly enjoyed its developments

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Fury Unleashed

Old-school shooting with a roguelike bite

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Awesome Games Studio **Developer** Awesome Games Studio **Release** May 8 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
A roguelike that plays like Contra and doles out meaningful rewards that help make subsequent runs easier

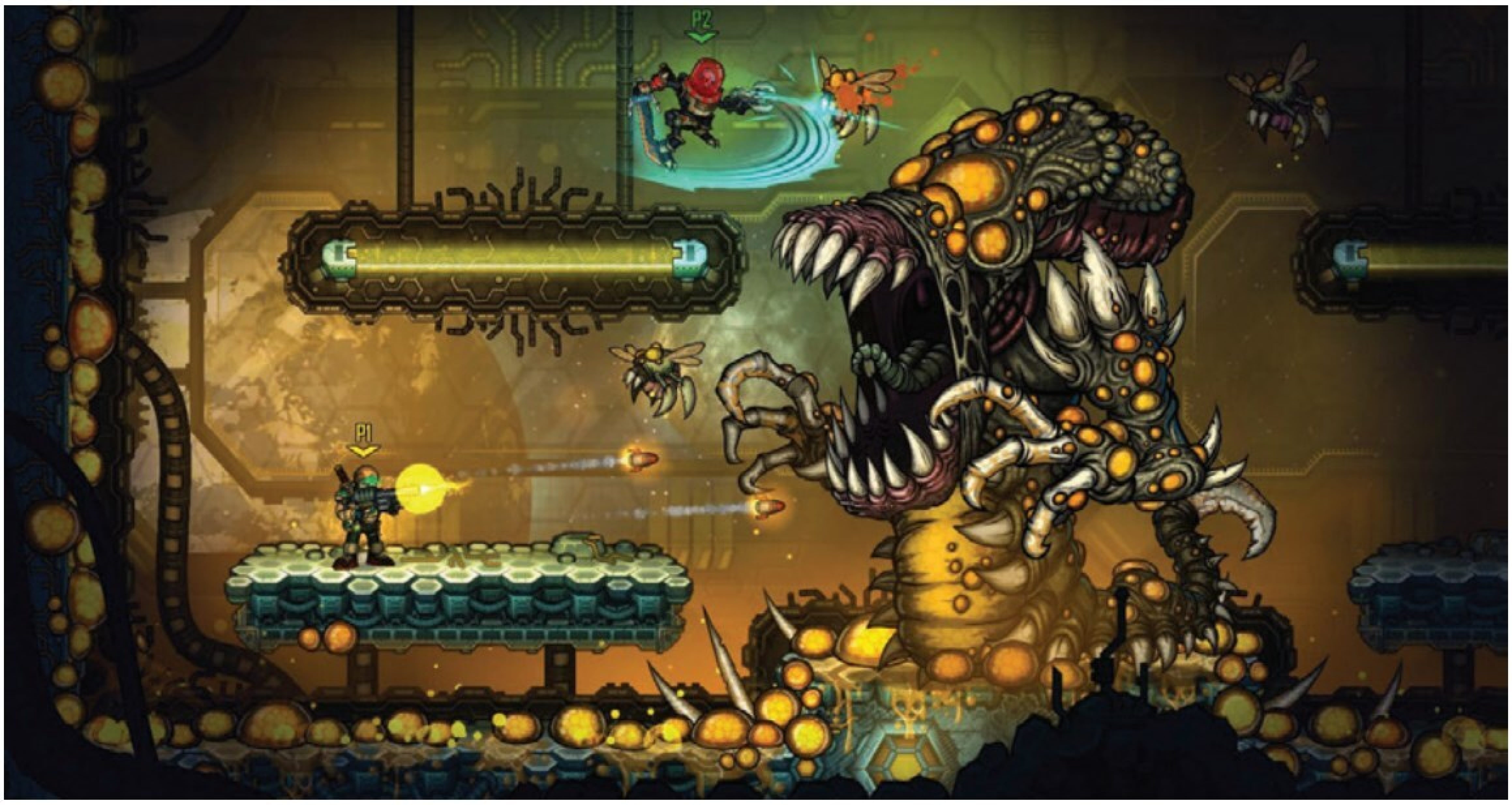
» Graphics
Stylish and bloody. The action is easy to follow, even with numerous enemies, spinning sawblades, and rockets crowding the screen

» Sound
The intense soundtrack is sometimes buried by the explosions and chaos, but that's also when the sound is at its best

» Playability
The controls are responsive and surprisingly deep, allowing for quick dashes, grenade tosses, special attacks, and weapon switches to be performed as you bounce across platforms

» Entertainment
The action pops and is excellently crafted. You always feel like you are on the verge of making more progress, which is a great feeling for a roguelike

» Replay Value
Moderately high



A run in Fury Unleashed often concludes with either you or a boss falling. This epic fight often comes down to both sides just having a sliver of health left. The spoils of victory are obviously greater than defeat, but even death can be rewarding, as every run potentially unlocks a new weapon, and perhaps enough experience points to level up and upgrade abilities. Developer Awesome Games Studio has created a balanced roguelike that delivers fun run-and-gun action and challenging battles that get a little less painful each time you attempt them.

Holding true to the Contra and Metal Slug games that Fury Unleashed draws inspiration from, you zip around stages filled with enemies, rotating the analog stick every which way to open fire. The controls are responsive and fluid, allowing you to quickly dash to new positions, and alternate between firearms and melee should enemies get too close. You can even bounce on enemy heads to make them explode, bank grenades off of walls, and use special attacks to freeze foes in place. All of this nicely made action is even better when you play with a friend, which is sadly only offered as couch co-op. If the game seems too hard, you can always lower the difficulty. The game is easy to get into and even easier to get lost in, given just how fun and rewarding it can be.

If you chain together kills, you hit combo thresholds that activate abilities that give you an edge, such as various damage resistances and healing. The entire game is set within the panels of comic books in which you battle a random assortment of creatures, humans, and machines (most dying within a few hits, but rare variations of enemies in a red hue play the role of mini-bosses). The variety in the enemies is a bit light, but I like how some panels explode in unexpected ways, whether it's Venus flytraps or turrets emerging from walls to join other foes.

If you die along the way, you are sent back to the comic's first panel, only it's different, and every following panel is also rearranged, sometimes bringing better rewards and other times deadlier foes. A giant boss waits for you on the final page, and should you be able to take it down, you move on to a new comic book with an entirely different theme with its own set of adversaries. This setup works well for lightning-quick playthroughs, which is fantastic since you often want to level up or change gear after a run. The comics are linked and arranged in random ways, so you don't have to finish a run when you find the last panel; you can always spend more time in a book by going back to see what each missed panel holds.

Since weapon and armor drops are all over the place, the randomized levels almost always deliver satisfactory loot. I may not find the exact weapon I want in each run, but I never find myself sticking with something I don't like for long, and am also able to pick up plenty of armor along the way. The true challenge is risking all by taking on a side task handed to you by an NPC. They ask many things of you, such as only using melee strikes to kill specific enemies or launching yourself through a dangerous gauntlet of obstacles, all for an unknown reward. These challenges create variety in the levels and make each run a little more interesting.

Fury Unleashed's story is its biggest surprise, as it focuses on the comic-book creator, who is down on himself and feels lost creatively. His story unfolds through text messages and social media posts that show how he and others feel about his work. When the first story moment is revealed, it's a bit of a record-scratch moment, but once you pick up on what is happening, the story is fascinating. It isn't what you would expect from something that looks and plays like Contra.

Like Dead Cells before it, Fury Unleashed is one of those roguelikes that is hard to put down, as you know the next run will only give you a better shot making more progress to unlock new comics, gear, and ultimately a better chance at taking down the final boss. It's a hell of a lot of fun, whether you're playing solo or co-op.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Disintegration

A strategic misstep

Style 1-Player Shooter/Strategy (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Private Division **Developer** V1 Interactive **Release** June 16 **Rating** T

Halo was conceived as a real-time strategy game, but it evolved into a first-person shooter over the course of development. I've often wondered what might have happened if Bungie had stuck to those strategy roots. Developer V1 Interactive – which is helmed by one of Halo's co-creators – has given us a window into a possible alternate reality with Disintegration, a sci-fi shooter that blends first-person combat with real-time strategy. But, if Disintegration is any indication of what might have been, then it's probably for the best that the original Halo wasn't an RTS.

Conceptually, I like Disintegration. You spend the entire game aboard a Gravcycle – which is basically a floating miniature tank that gives you a birds-eye view of the action where you can issue orders to a small squad of grunts. That idea is solid, and I appreciate how your combat hovercar adds a vertical element to first-person combat. Unfortunately, Disintegration's gravcycle also makes you feel removed from the action because you literally float over the action.

Spending the entire game in the sky also has a few unexpected consequences, not the least of which is your sense of speed. Your gravcycle has a decent base speed for a ground vehicle, but since you hover overhead, you feel like you're puttering across the battlefield in a golf cart. What's more, since you float a story or two over your enemy's heads, you often don't have options for taking cover when things heat up. Thankfully, the action rarely gets that chaotic, but since you're removed from the center of the battle, you often feel like you're shooting tiny fish in a big barrel.

Disintegrations moment-to-moment action doesn't evolve much over the course of the game. Your gravcycle's loadout for each mission is predetermined, which limits your options in combat. Most of the time, you're outfitted with one offensive gun and one defensive tool – often something that allows you to heal the squad. This fixed loadout means that you spend long stretches going through the same motions and encounters tend to blend together.

Issuing orders to your squad offers a fun twist to combat but doesn't fix Disintegration's larger issues. At any point, you can direct your team across the field, highlight targets for them to focus on, or deploy their special moves, which are set to cooldowns. These abilities range from simple grenades to disruption fields that disable enemies for a short time, but they're almost always useful. I had fun comboing abilities off each other, like when I dropped a slow field on a group of enemies before barraging them with mortar fire. While Disintegration's strategic elements are a highlight, they're ultimately not very important. Your squad members do a fine job of taking care of themselves, and they tend not to hang around wherever you put them for very long, so there is little reason to micromanage their movements.

Some of the biggest flaws in Disintegration's action are curtailed in multiplayer, where you encounter foes that look and move around the environment like you, which provides a more engaging challenge. Disintegration's multiplayer maps are smaller than the single-player campaign levels, which reduces the illusion of sluggish movement. These maps also offer places to hide and make use of your verticality. I got a thrill out of hiding in some overlooked corner of a map and then descending on a foe from above. Even so, Disintegrations first-person shooting remains barebones given your limited loadout, and I had a harder time corralling my troops in multiplayer; they often seemed eager to run into the fray and instantly die in larger firefights.

Unfortunately, Disintegration's multiplayer doesn't have a lot of staying power. The initial release only features three modes: team deathmatch, king of the hill, and capture the flag, so I quickly felt like I'd seen everything on offer. At the beginning of a match, you can choose from one of several teams, such as the shotgun-wielding Militia or the clown-themed Sideshows who fire sticky bombs, but these are just variations on the single-player loadouts, so the only real difference is the weapon you're using. Even Disintegration's progression system is lacking. As you play you earn coins, but they only thing to spend them on are new cosmetic options. To be clear, these aren't new costumes, they are simple color variants of the existing character models.

Disintegration's core idea of blending a first-person shooter with a strategy game is really neat, but the game takes so many missteps that it's hard to recognize that one good idea. The action is repetitive, and the basic mission design is tired – you can't even save the game mid-mission, which is particularly baffling. Between bouts with tedium, I had an occasional moment of fun, but those moments were fleeting. I hope someone tries to mash up first-person shooters and real-time strategy games again, but it needs a fundamental rethink. » **Ben Reeves**

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Jump aboard a gravcycle and issue commands to a small number of units in this mashup of the FPS and RTS genres

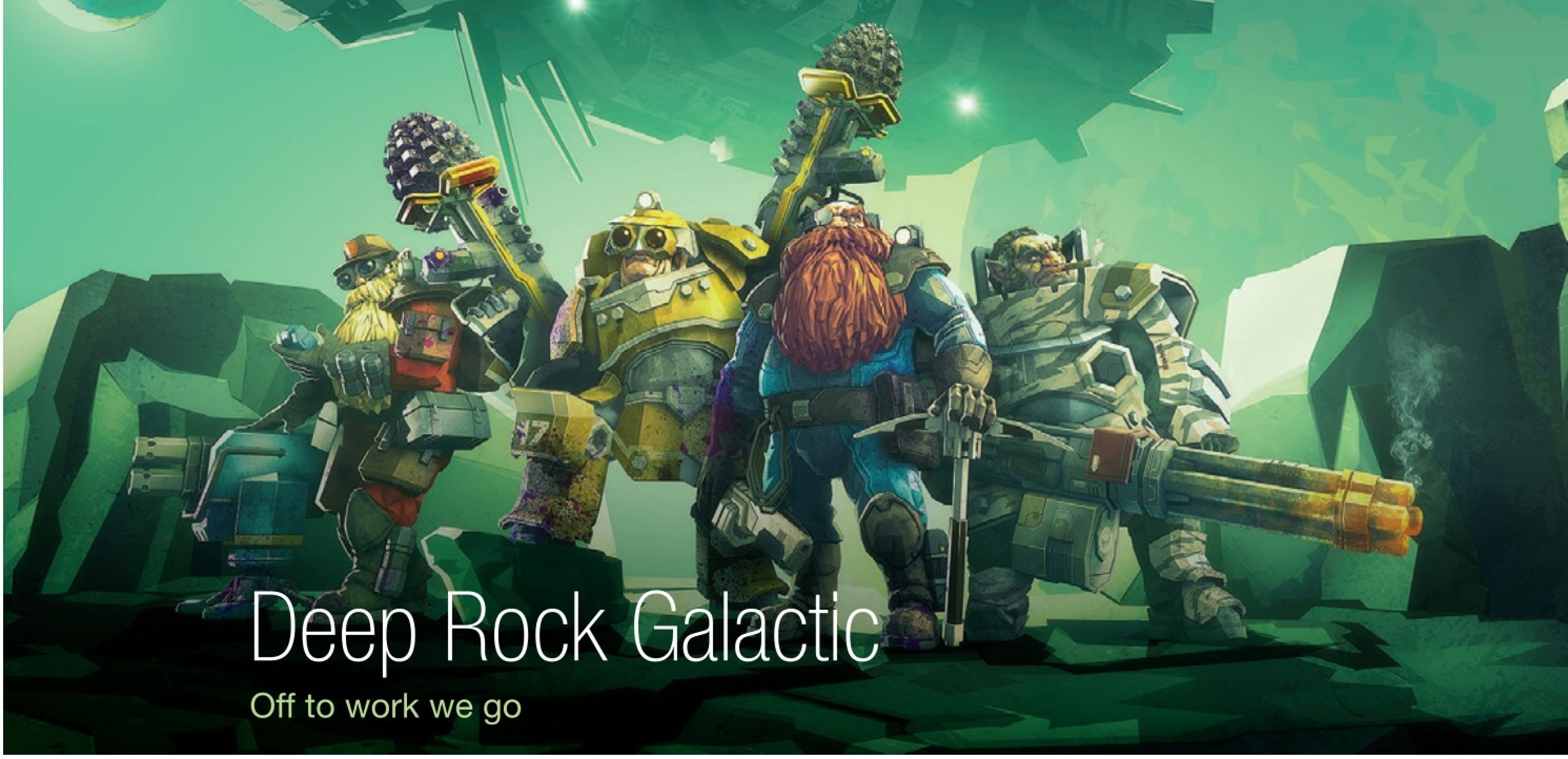
» Graphics
Some of the environmental textures take a while to load, but the framerate maintains a steady clip

» Sound
The voice cast does a solid job with a forgettable script, but the musical score is largely mediocre

» Playability
Controlling the gravcycle is easy and intuitive, and the first-person shooter controls are fairly standard

» Entertainment
Issuing orders to your team is fun, but your movements are sluggish and the combat encounters are uninspired

» Replay Value
Moderately low



Deep Rock Galactic

Off to work we go

8.5

Style 1 to 4-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Coffee Stain Publishing **Developer** Ghost Ship Games **Release** May 13 **Rating** T

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
There's a planet to mine, and it's filled with deadly alien bugs. You're space dwarves – get to it

» Graphics
The star of the show is the lighting from your flares, as the balance between darkness and light in the deep caves adds a lot to the gameplay

» Sound
Foul-mouthed and grumpy dwarves make you laugh with their boisterous shouts, and the occasional high-octane musical riff lets you know things are about to get real

» Playability
Each of four classes is thoughtfully balanced and fun, with solid options for difficulty selection. The limited mapping and waypoint options are purposeful, but can frustrate at times

» Entertainment
A fantastic cooperative experience that delves deep into one narrow corner of fantasy tropes – the dwarven love of hard work and pretty rocks

» Replay Value
High

The great triumph of Deep Rock Galactic is transforming drudgery into something thrilling and repeatable. You work for a corporation that cares more about minor profits than your survival. You are sent into dark caves to hack away small quantities of minerals and face off against massive alien bugs. Yet as a stalwart space dwarf doing what he does best, you're having a grand time, because the game's systems contrive to transform that work into something magical.

One big reason for that success is the smartly structured approach to cooperative play. Deep Rock Galactic may be played solo (with the help of an A.I. drone), but it's way less enjoyable. The game is at its best with a full four-person team of miners working together. Thankfully, a fast and responsive backend allows for quick joining or hosting of sessions, so good grouping is possible even if your friends aren't around.

The four classes are thoughtfully balanced and play well together, complementing each other's skill sets. The scout's flare gun and grappling hook get him to where he needs to be. The driller's tunneling capabilities expedite any endeavor, and his flamethrower is a crowd-control boon. The gunner's weaponry holds the line, and his zip lines make team navigation manageable. And the engineer's platform-creation enables the mining of seemingly inaccessible spots, even as his turrets hold control zones. Each adds something invaluable to the group, and I enjoyed my time with each.

In any given mining run, your space mining crew is sent hurtling into the depths of a mineral-rich planet overrun by hostile alien bugs. Sometimes you're just there to collect a particular type of rock, but you may also be eliminating particularly nasty foes or retrieving abandoned caches. Secondary objectives lend an interesting risk/reward dynamic, adding time in the depths, but with significant boosts to payout. As you climb the ladder of harder missions, secrets may be uncovered, from hidden cosmetics to challenging bonus encounters. With a pickaxe in hand, there's a satisfying balance in each mission between gathering, and then switching gears to stave off the horde. Battles are intense, and demand constant teamwork.

Regardless, the procedurally generated cave systems are expansive. Deep Rock Galactic encourages a focus on exploration, and the mapping and objective markers are limited. That's often fun, leading to moments of excitement as you smash through a dirt wall to find a massive crystalline chamber. However, the freeform wandering can lead to a sense of aimlessness. Likewise, the game makes great use of light, as the dwarves send out flares to survey the area. But the overriding darkness can wear thin, and the shifting light sources mean it's easy to get lost.

In between work shifts, your time back on the space rig features some fun interactions. Upgrade a beer-brewing license, and toast each other before a number of silly effects take over, like lighting you on fire or changing your size. Dance a dwarven jig by the nearby jukebox. Press a button to turn off gravity. It's all delightfully frivolous.

This space station is also where you upgrade your miner's equipment. Consistent play leads to an array of perks, most with only minor effects. A few unlockable weapons await each class, and an array of upgrades for armor and the rest of your arsenal. However, many of the important upgrades are acquired in the early hours, and the focus shifts to a very slow cosmetic-unlock path. I found myself wishing for some more meaningful options; tweaking your look demands hours of investment, and more gameplay-affecting upgrades would have been welcome. You eventually open up "promotion," which adds some new extended missions and a few additional upgrade options. With that said, the leveling curve is relatively flat, and characters of disparate levels can generally play just fine with one another, except on the hardest settings.

Minor quibbling aside, Deep Rock Galactic is a great time, and highly replayable. The dwarves grumble and complain at each other, but happily tackle each new challenge with dogged determinism. It's satisfying to have your whole team empty out into a new cavern, and then immediately set to work chipping away at rock and bug alike. Even transplanted from their popularization in Tolkien or Snow White and into a dark corner of space, the essence of the dwarven fantasy is richly realized here, and consistently makes me smile. Bring some friends, a handy pickaxe, and a cantankerous attitude, and you'll be smiling as well.

» Matt Miller

Minecraft Dungeons

Familiarity needs content

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Developer** Mojang, Double Eleven **Release** May 26 **Rating** E10+

Minecraft Dungeons is a roller-coaster ride of an action/RPG, giving new players a fairly deep representation of the genre while offering veterans a nice diversion from traditionally grimdark trappings. Minecraft's familiar world, tools, and other elements seamlessly make the transition from the mainline series. Its suite of enemies is a natural fit for this type of game, and Mojang introduces new members of the menagerie to fill out a few missing archetypes. Unfortunately, Minecraft Dungeons' padded-out midgame is repetitive even among its grind-heavy peers. The first big drop in this ride had me screaming, but it wasn't from exhilaration.

Minecraft's "play how you want to" philosophy is a driving force in Dungeons. When you start out, you pick a skin for your character, but not a class; instead, that action has more of free-flowing feel. One moment I was taking down zombies with a flurry of up-close dagger strikes, only to smack a golem in the forehead with a newly found giant hammer a few minutes later. That kind of flexibility is a great goal, and I appreciate not being held down by choices I made hours ago. The implementation of this freedom isn't fully successful, however.

Most notably, you're at the mercy of probability tables when it's time to replace your weapons, armor, or artifacts. You can't upgrade an item's fundamental level as you outgrow it, and there aren't stores that sell specific pieces, so you can't craft or customize anything new to fit your desired playstyle. This approach severely limits your options, because without any foundational class abilities, everything your character can do is determined by the items you have equipped. No matter how much you want to be a tanky fighter, you can't unless you are lucky enough to have the right equipment at the appropriate level.

You get these items as rewards for defeating enemies, but you also use in-game currency to buy blind-box chests from merchants. The contents of these chests are so wide in scope that they're essentially worthless. You can buy chests with gear or artifacts, but "gear" encompasses all categories of weapons and armor – swords, bows, armor, axes, maces, daggers, and more. "Artifacts" include every type of spell-like ability, from pet-summoning to healing. This turns every blacksmith visit into a virtual casino, and rather than looking forward to what each transaction might bring, I started to dread every encounter with the smith. Good luck getting what you're after.

Artifacts are essentially your skills, and they can be equipped like gear. These operate on cooldowns, and, coupled with enchants, allow for some basic and satisfying synergies. A fireworks arrow lets you fire a special projectile with a damaging blast radius. I loved this artifact on its own, but using it with a bow equipped with multishot and infinity enchants not only gave me a random chance of firing several of these explosive payloads at once, but of nocking an additional one for a bonus follow-up salvo. Combinations like these are rewarding, which makes it even more of a bummer knowing that I'd eventually out-level their utility without a reliable way of finding replacements.

Beating the campaign unlocks a higher Adventure difficulty, with better loot and tougher monsters. Beat that, and you get the Apocalypse setting, which promises even more of everything. I managed to do so over the course of several marathon sessions, but it's not worth the trouble. The awkward middle period of the game lasts entirely too long; that's when you can see the possibilities that the various enchantments and items have, but none of the drops are good enough to live up to that potential. I didn't get any drops with three enchantment slots until the tail end of Adventure mode – after playing the same levels over and over again for about a dozen hours. Every item I picked up was a compromise in some way, but not in a fun or gratifying way.

Once the initial novelty of recognizing familiar elements from the Minecraft world wears off, you're left with a remarkable sense of déjà vu. Sure, levels are procedurally generated, but barely so. I was convinced that something was broken, since variation between playthroughs was so slight. I played one level back to back and was proven wrong. The main beats of a particular stage are the same session to session, with subtle variations in where hallways may go or whether one section will have a few extra rooms. I'm not expecting completely reworked levels, but it makes exploration boring. That's inexcusable for a Minecraft game, and it feels stingy.

Minecraft Dungeons has a solid core, and I'd love to see where it goes from here. Hopefully, Mojang recognizes the fact that games with grinding don't have to be as much of a grind. It would be great to have some kind of way to experience levels in a remixed format, similar to how Diablo III has rifts or Torchlight and Path of Exile offer more randomized maps to encourage replays. But Minecraft Dungeons' current approach is simply replaying the same stuff over again and just isn't enough. » **Jeff Cork**

7

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
An approachable action/RPG set within the world of Minecraft, featuring recognizable creatures and biomes

» Graphics
Minecraft's iconic aesthetic shines here, and looks great as a backdrop for the action

» Sound
The score beautifully fits with what you've come to expect from Minecraft. Audio is light overall, and the silent heroes, as on-brand as they may be, feel weird

» Playability
Aim assists make targeting enemies at range a breeze, and melee has a satisfying bite. However, combat is repetitive, even within a genre built on the grind

» Entertainment
The first few hours are a treat, and the late game has a nice element of experimentation. Unfortunately, its flaws balloon out during the lengthy middle stretch

» Replay Value
High

The Last Of Us Part II

A perfect circle

10

PS4

» Concept
The next chapter in the story of Ellie and Joel changes your perceptions of who they are and the world they live in

» Graphics
If this isn't the best-looking PlayStation 4 game, it is certainly near the top of the list

» Sound
An amazing soundtrack is complemented by audio tracks that bring tension to almost every scene

» Playability
The stealth/horror mechanics feel great from beginning to end, and an array of difficulty and accessibility options make the experience highly customizable

» Entertainment
The Last of Us Part II is a monumental achievement in video game storytelling

» Replay Value
Moderate

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 327

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Naughty Dog **Release** June 19 **Rating** M

There are many things about human nature we struggle against. We see what we want to see. We acquire our beliefs and perspectives from the people and the world around us. And sometimes, in order to see, we must be shown.

The Last of Us Part II illuminates many complicated and difficult facets of humanity – a journey that tackles empathy, anger, and how we are defined by those around us. These philosophical considerations can be uncomfortable to wrestle with, but Naughty Dog conveys them with careful nuance and unflinching emotion, creating a narrative masterpiece with a unique power few games have ever achieved.

The story opens with a conversation about how the first game ended – about what Joel did at the Firefly hospital, and the lie he told Ellie about it. That exchange lays the foundation for the current state of their complicated relationship, which players come to understand even more deeply as the story continues. Holed up in an encampment in Jackson, Wyoming, Ellie and Joel are trying to come to terms with the consequences of their previous actions, and the world continues to suffer from the chaos of the infection that has transformed mankind and ravaged civilization.

The Last of Us Part II is defined by its story at every turn, and Naughty Dog masterfully weaves its themes in at every level. It depicts the raw violence that Ellie uses to navigate this harsh world, and that violence feeds into pivotal plot points during her quest for revenge. Yes, you kill many humans and Infected along the way, but the accumulated effect of Ellie's fury weighs on you over time. Even as you clear an area of hostile guards, you question your own role in the brutality. The people you assassinate have names, and you can overhear them talking about their loved ones as you sneak up on them. Though it's difficult to say that this is "fun," the way The Last of Us Part II forges this level of investment and immersion is one of its greatest strengths.

The chaotic, post-apocalyptic overlay creates the perfect opportunity for different factions to vie for power. In addition to the zombie-like Infected, you also fight the militarized WLF and the technology-averse Seraphites. You deal with all these groups in intense encounters that blend sneaking and shooting in varied and unpredictable ways. Ellie's increased agility lets you jump, crawl, and vault through areas and take advantage of verticality, but the biggest improvement to combat is the way the world pushes you to play. Stealth is always rewarded, and you can control the battlefield with clever use of your resources, especially in the larger environments. I knew I made a mistake when I died, and I felt satisfaction when I skillfully handled a situation.

Even with its many combat scenarios, The Last of Us Part II offers tranquil and lonely moments. Some areas are devoid of encounters completely, but they don't feel barren. Instead, they focus on world-building, or cause you as a player to reflect on your actions. The people you meet along the way also play an important part in your journey; when traveling alone, you feel their absence.

Environments tell their own stories of those who became infected. People waiting for their families to return, soldiers hunting deserters, and patients seeking treatment – you piece together these tragic and fascinating tales by reading notes and interpreting clues in the world. From a more practical standpoint, exploring every area is important for gathering resources used to craft items and upgrade talents like faster crawling and improved awareness. Almost every corner has something to find, and I felt rewarded for digging through drawers and searching every room. Going into an empty store, it was easy to feel for the characters in this world who had their lives upended. And as much as gaming can be an escape, the state of the real world right now provides a lens that is difficult to ignore; I never thought seeing the remains of a bookstore or a restaurant would hit harder due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they did.

The production values that Naughty Dog brings to this experience are second to none. The characters don't only look good – they look real, complete with quirks that make them more believable as humans. The world and its inhabitants are visually stunning, with artwork and animations you will see just once, quips and conversations that make the world feel alive, and a soundtrack and sound effects that brought chills to my spine. Low hums and water dripping on empty bottles add to the tension as you navigate the perils of the world.

I can rave about the attention to detail, the world, and the combat, but the story is where The Last of Us Part II sets a new bar. It is more about challenging your heart than your reflexes, and I simply cannot recommend it enough. There is much to be said about this game that can't be said here due to spoilers, but you should play it as soon as you can with as little info as possible. But you don't need to know specifics to appreciate how the gameplay and environmental cues all play into a single purpose: They make you feel the choices, helplessness, and the violence at the heart of this world and its characters. I can safely say this is the best narrative game I have played. I felt the loss. I felt the confusion. It is a game that turned me inside out with each twist of the screw. » **Andy McNamara**

Valorant

The old is new again

8.5

Style 10-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Riot Games **Developer** Riot Games **Release** June 2 **Rating** T

PC

» Concept
Participate in team-based tactical shooting, utilizing special skills alongside traditional weaponry

» Graphics
Designed to be compatible with many PC specs, the graphics don't stand out as anything special

» Sound
Auditory cues play an essential role and are handled well, though character quips are more annoying than entertaining. As is the case for so many team-oriented games that benefit from communication, bring your own friends instead of random people

» Playability
With demanding tactical decisions and fast-paced play, a Counter-Strike background is incredibly useful

» Entertainment
Valorant takes a traditional template and adds some flash and flair to the competitive formula

» Replay Value
High

Valorant builds on what has made Counter-Strike a destination for decades. It adds hero-shooter nuance to a familiar arsenal of weapons. Valorant is a methodical, strategic affair; a stealthy and careful approach takes priority over going in guns-blazing. It's a game of cat and mouse in which players are constantly attempting to glean information for an advantage. When the time comes to pull the trigger, speed and twitch reflexes are still paramount, but everything that happens before the confrontation is important. A combination of splashy and significant side abilities make a difference, but the core is all about corners, communication, and careful positioning.

Valorant's hero roster takes the "agents from many nations" route that was successful in injecting flavor into Overwatch's cast of characters. It falls flat here, though, with a variety of uninteresting designs and repetitive quips. The cast is forgettable and bland, feeling more like off-brand action figures than cool characters. The last thing I want to hear before a match is Raze, ostensibly getting ready to punch holes in people with a revolver, chirping, "You sure I can't listen to music? You're really bringing me down here man!" or Phoenix zinging a "stay out of fire" because you know, he's the fire character. Personality across the board feels forced and flimsy. Luckily, their hero kits and abilities are far more interesting, and these aspects set Valorant apart from its inspirations.

Many of these talents involve either providing or denying information. Cypher's camera and trip-wires can detect threats long before they come into your sight lines, Sova's drone can locate enemy movements while you hide safely behind cover, and numerous other skills obscure opponents' vision to allow you to position safely. Information and communication, not spray-and-pray, is how games are won. Peeking corners carefully and tiptoeing around maps is a pleasant change of pace from many other shooters, but if you're looking for frenzied assaults and fast respawns, this isn't the game for you.

The star of Valorant is the weapons. Regardless of your timing and usage of skills, eventually things come down to your guns. Every one packs a precise and impactful punch, and they feel great to use. You need to stop moving to gain accuracy (which in turn makes you a target), but coming out of a 2v1 or 3v1 with intelligent reloading, cover usage, and judicious ability use gives you an amazing rush.

Valorant has two modes, Standard and Spike Rush. Standard games can take quite a while to play and involve an economy element from round to round, where saving your money to buy better guns, armor, and skills can be a strategy. Mastering a weapon is good fun, and finding your favorite positions to play on each map is satisfying. For example, knowing where to take your Marshal sniper rifle for a long-range face-off is important. Spike Rush is essentially a fast take on the default mode, with greatly reduced number of rounds, randomized weapons each round, and everyone on the offensive team has a bomb to plant. Because Spike Rush is basically just a pared-down version of Standard, it feels like Valorant only has one game type at the end of day. The core experience is solid, but it doesn't have enough variety.

Valorant doesn't reinvent aspects of core tactical shooters, but it differentiates itself in meaningful ways by giving players new ways to glean information, protect areas, and obscure enemy perception. While Valorant's characters may be mundane and its modes limited, I had plenty of fun with its precision shooting, careful planning, and soft footsteps. » **Daniel Tack**

Monster Train

Delightfully devious deckbuilding

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Good Shepherd **Developer** Shiny Shoe **Release** May 21 **Rating** NA

Monster Train owes much to Slay the Spire for popularizing the roguelike deck-builder RPG, both at a high level and in some of its features and mechanics. But don't dismiss Monster Train as a mere clone or derivative work like so many other games attempting to capture the deck-building magic.

In Monster Train, your mind goes into overdrive like a locomotive ripping through hell as you determine the most decadent, degenerate combinations of cards. At first, the experience is an easy task that requires little effort, but subsequent runs and customization unlocks add serious complexity to the mix, making Monster Train a game that makes hours – even days – melt away in a masterful moment.

The action all happens on a three-story train, where enemies come in on the bottom floor. If they make it to the top, they bash your life points away. When your life points are gone, your run is over. The goal is simple: through a variety of monsters and spells, stop them from stopping your train. Some bosses are the same every time, but they come with a different mix of abilities and cronies that help keep things feeling fresh.

Different selectable factions form the basis for your decks and champion each run, consisting of core cards and an upgradeable leader. While you can liken some of them at the base level to mage, healer, or aggressive melee archetypes, there's a lot more going on here. Each faction plays quite differently, and you combine two different factions in each run to determine your spell, monster, and artifact pools. These synergies lead to a ton of fun experiments, and each faction feels unique on its own as well. From the candle-creatures that boast incredible power but burn out over time, to the umbral race that feeds upon little morsel-monsters that look like they escaped the forges of Spirited Away, the choices are distinct and a blast to concoct curious alchemy with.

You can weed out unwanted cards from your deck as well as add and modify new ones. Combining your cards with artifacts that have persistent global effects can make or break a run, like an object that randomizes the play cost of all your cards, potentially letting you use your high-cost options for free. Each little synergy you discover is a joy, and then putting multiple concepts together to tackle a high-difficulty run is incredibly satisfying, stacking many layers of strategy on top of each other.

However, runs can start to feel too similar after you discover the various ways you can break things extra hard by stacking multi-strike effects or armor incantation. On the mega difficulty modes, you are forced to seek out the most brutal and broken combos each time, and although the core bosses change a bit, the game can feel like you're simply playing against yourself and some randomization each time instead of any real enemy.

Monster Train is a pleasant, mind-blowingly addictive exercise that's well worth your time, especially if you're a fan of roguelikes, card games, and deck-building fare. Hours of entertainment await, often chained back-to-back like a crazy card combo.

» **Daniel Tack**

9

PC

» **Concept**
Steer a train into the depths of hell to reclaim it from the forces of heaven

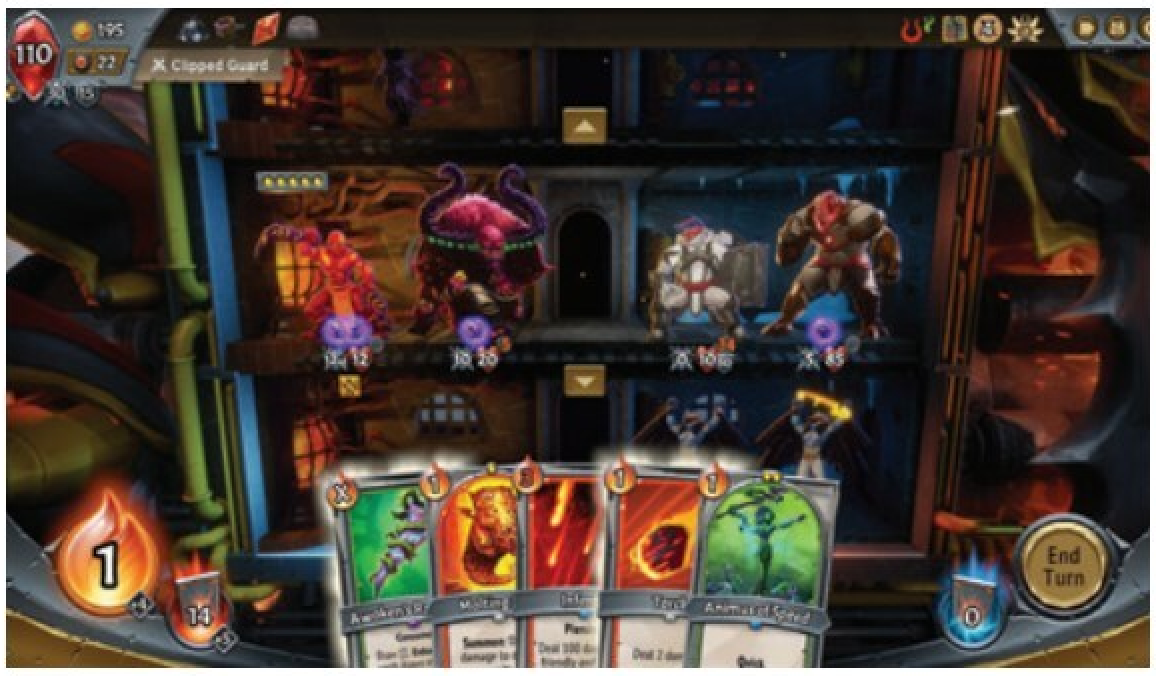
» **Graphics**
Animations and assets bring a surprising amount of life to waxen combatants and overgrown vine monsters

» **Sound**
A stirring score keeps your mind chugging along with the train as you ponder your turns

» **Playability**
Easy to pick up and understand, with considerable complexity for players who want to dive into progressively more challenging runs

» **Entertainment**
Monster Train may seem simple at first, but hours melt away with disturbing ease as you attempt to break the game – then break it even more as the challenge rises

» **Replay Value**
High



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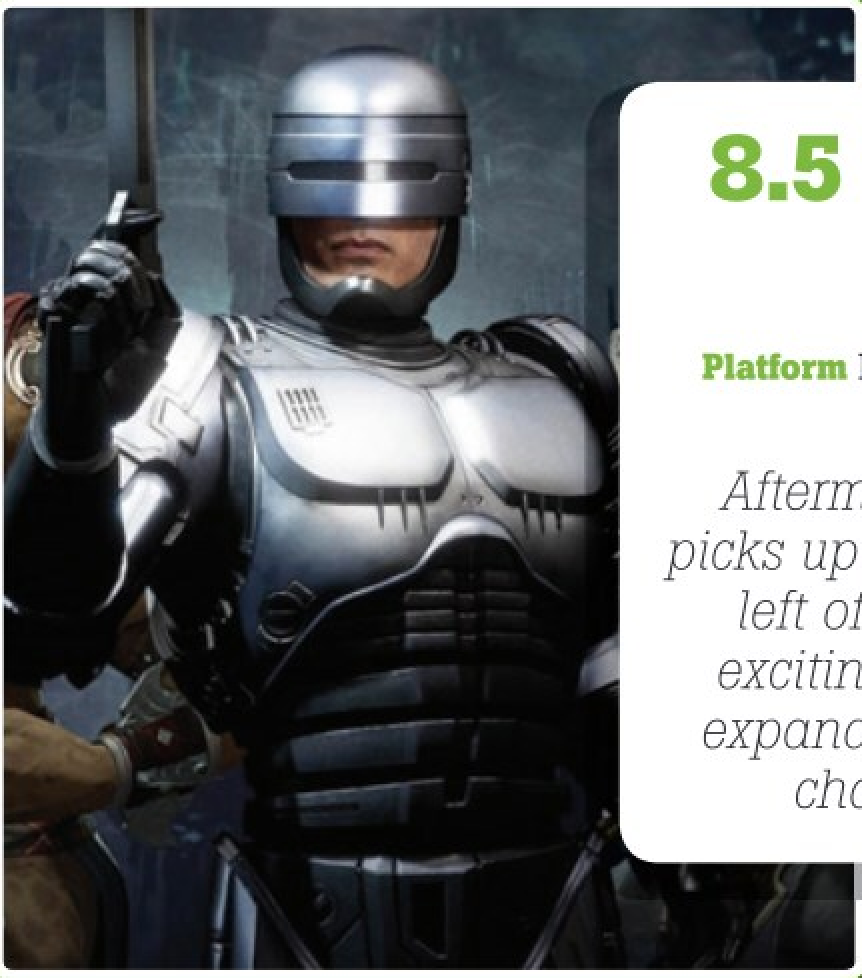

8.5 Mortal Kombat 11: Aftermath

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Stadia • PC
Release May 26 **Rating** M

Aftermath adds a new tale that picks up right where the base game left off, giving you yet another exciting adventure featuring the expanding cast of Mortal Kombat characters. – Brian Shea

6.75 Crucible

Platform PC **Release** May 21 **Rating** T

Crucible isn't a bad game, but it's not a good game either. In the context of today's hero-shooter environment, that makes it a lost soul, struggling to find a strong sense of identity. With time, perhaps Crucible can find reasons to stay on the menu, but right now the recipe is diluted and dull. – Daniel Tack

7.5 Brigandine: The Legend Of Runersia

Platform Switch **Release** June 25 **Rating** T

Brigandine: The Legend of Runersia personalizes the strategy/RPG experience by letting you recruit and get to know your combatants in side stories. Watching your team grow in strength and invading new areas makes you feel powerful, even if it lacks variety and gets repetitive. – Kimberley Wallace

7.75 Evan's Remains

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** June 11 **Rating** E

A disappointing conclusion hurts the narrative, and a lack of evolution hurts puzzles; since the game is split distinctly into sections involving only those two things, even the best moments of Evan's Remains carry a sense of unfulfilled potential. – Joe Juba

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8 Song Of Horror Complete Edition

Platform PC **Release** May 28 **Rating** NR

Song of Horror is an ode to classic survival horror that taps into what makes the genre resonate with fans who want to get in on the action. There are a few bum notes here and there, but it's a tense bit of storytelling worth experiencing. *– Jeff Cork*

7.5 Golf With Your Friends

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Release May 19 **Rating** E10+

Golf With Your Friends captures the spirit of minigolf – you're going to have some laughs, frustrations, and at the end of the day, not take it all too seriously. *– Matthew Kato*

7.5 Timelie

Platform PC
Release May 20 **Rating** T

Several games offer players the chance to rewind time and pause the action, but I've never grown tired of this particular power fantasy. I appreciate Timelie's stealth-based, tactical approach to time manipulation. But just as Timelie starts to hit its stride, I hit the credits. *– Ben Reeves*

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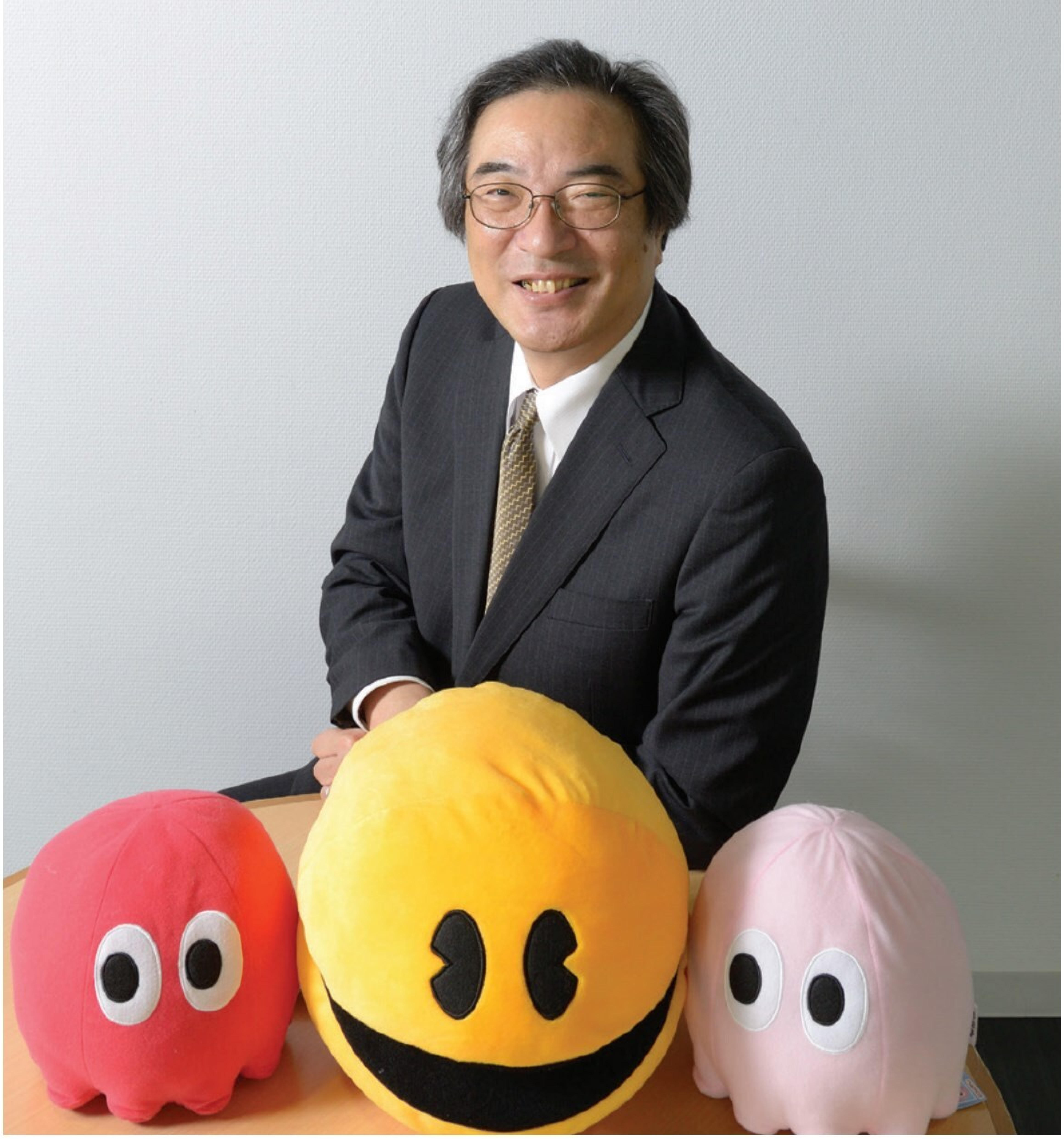


Leader Of The PAC

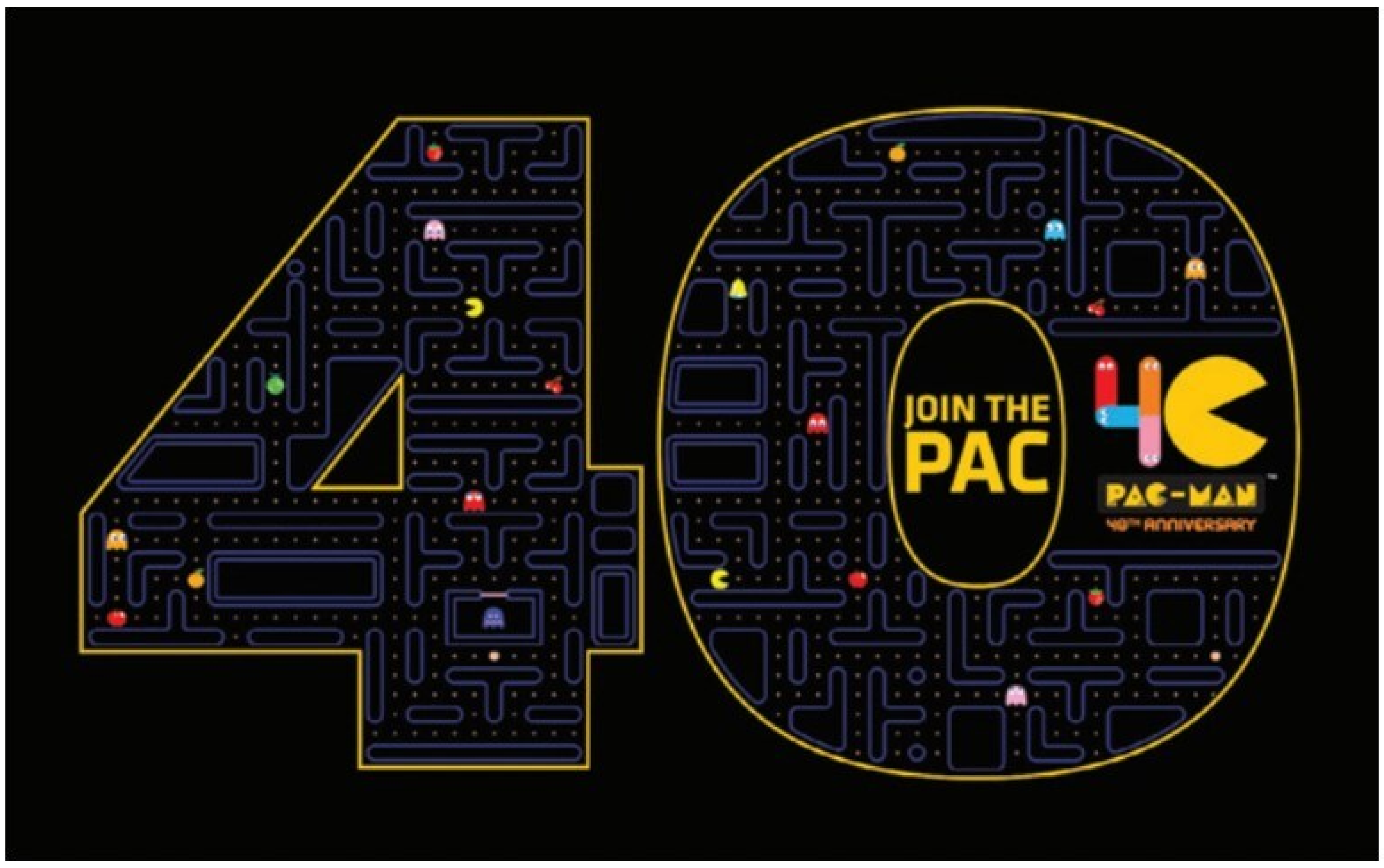
An interview with Pac-Man creator Toru Iwatani

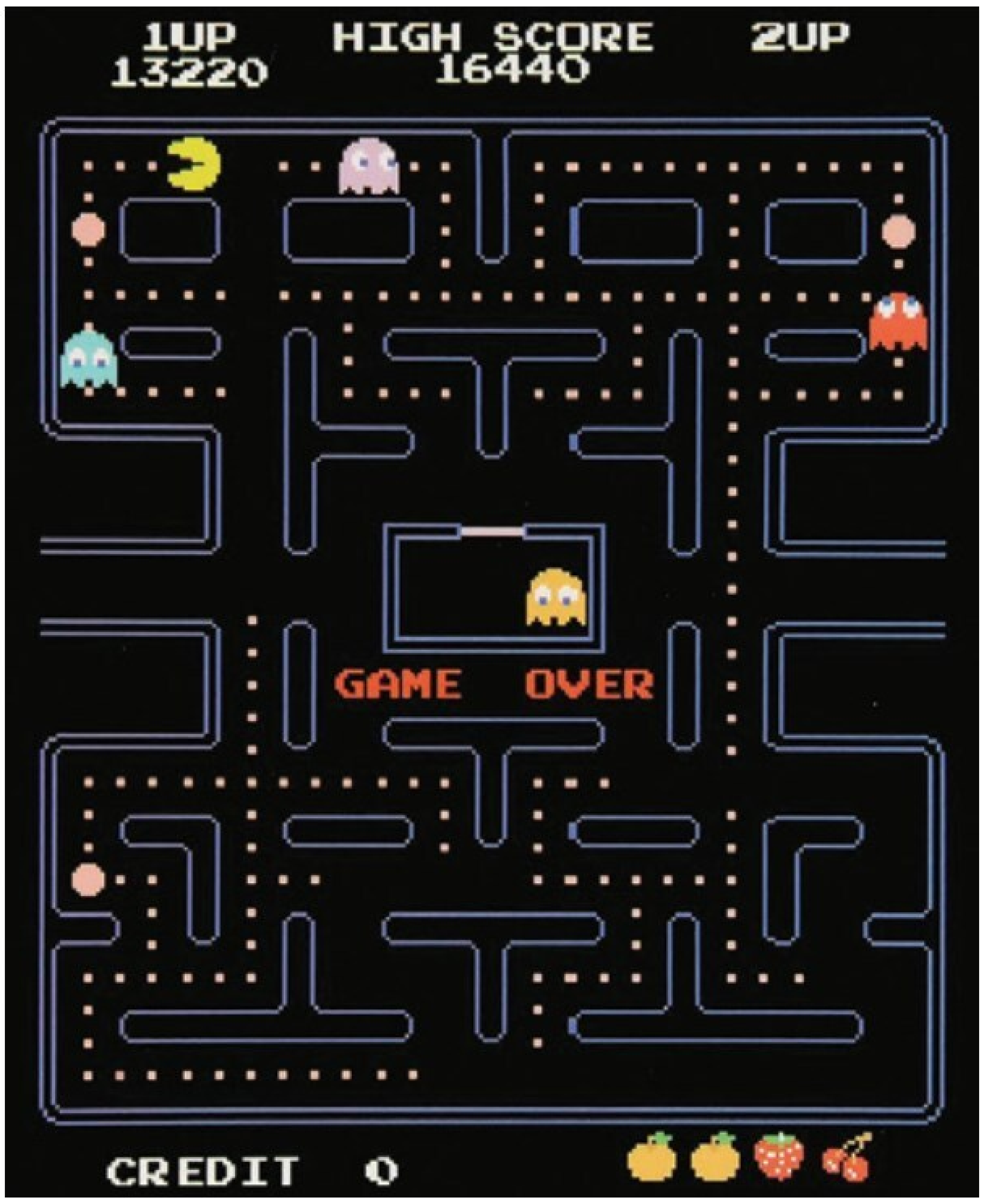
Forty years ago, Toru Iwatani took a look at a pizza then created one of the most iconic video game characters of all time. The release of Pac-Man created a frenzy that reportedly caused coin shortages and spawned a Top 40 single. According to the Guinness World Records, more than 293,000 Pac-Man machines were built throughout the '80s, making it the most successful coin-operated arcade machine ever produced. In honor of this anniversary, we spoke with Iwatani about the creation of Pac-Man and why he thinks the character has had such a lasting legacy. ***by Ben Reeves***

Pac-Man is actually older than a lot of the people who play games today. Why do you think the character has had such an impressive legacy?
We targeted the game towards female audiences and dating couples, so I believe the cute design, the easy learning curve, and simple-yet-intuitive four-way controls resonated well with everyone. Having the Ghosts chase you then turning the tables and chasing the Ghosts and gobbling them up in succession is quite gratifying, which I think is another reason why the game is adored to this day.

Before getting into the digital arcade market, you wanted to make pinball machines. Do you still play pinball? What do you think of the new machines?
Pinball captivated me with how the ball moves according to the laws of physics, the fun in reading the ball's movement, and with the vibrant graphics that adorned the backglass and playfield. I still play pinball, but not many arcades in Japan have them nowadays, so I literally go the extra mile just to play them.

The popular story is that you created Pac-Man after seeing a pizza with a missing slice, but some have disputed that. What's the real story?
Oh, it's the truth all right! I was eating a whole pizza while I was thinking about making a game themed after





"eating." It was then that I came up with Pac-Man's game design after looking at the pie with a slice taken from it.

What kind of game do you think you would have made if you'd been eating hot dogs instead?
I may have come up with a game where you're at a baseball field, and you would have to make a choice whether to let your hot dog go or to catch the ball flying toward you in the stands ... or maybe not.

Pac-Man performed well in Japan, but its popularity really exploded in the U.S. Were you surprised by its varying success in different markets?
I initially thought it wouldn't do well in the U.S., where gamers sought games that offered thrills and excitement. I suppose the simple game mechanic and cute characters resonated well with male and female, young and old alike, but I never expected it to blow up like that.

Your original development team included seven people, which seems incredibly large for a game made in 1980. Was it helpful to have that many people working on an arcade game?
Teamwork was great among the seven on our team, which was composed of three software developers, one computer-hardware designer, one wiring-board designer, one machine designer, and one cabinet designer, who all worked hard to build the game.

How much did the original game evolve with testing from the original concept? We know that the warp tunnels on the side of the screen were added late in development.
I think the biggest change came from the addition of the Power Pellet that is used to turn the tables between Pac-Man and the Ghosts. Also, the warp tunnels and tweaking the speed of Pac-Man and the Ghosts toward the end of development made quite an impact.

How have you seen the video game industry change over the decades?
Back when games were played at arcades, the release of home consoles brought about a new concept in entertainment. It was then that I thought portable game devices would expand the gaming horizon, but I never expected to see a day where people from around the world can connect via the Internet and communicate with others on smartphones. With how procedural generation technology and A.I. has greatly innovated game development, I believe the game industry will expand into games that are created to help solve problems within society.

Like what?
I believe that we can help solve problems in society by tapping into the compelling nature of games, and how they hold the power to maintain the interest and attention of players. Just a few years ago, games had already started to be used to entertain people and help with academic and rehabilitation programs. In more recent years, VR goggles and technology, which were originally developed for games and entertainment, are being used in the field of telemedicine and telehealth. There is a genre known as "serious games," which are games with practical applications that bring up real world problems in society. Game designers are using "gamification" to focus on inherent problems in reality and trying to find ways to resolve them. I believe games will continue to find ways of making our lives and society better.

What was your impression of Ms. Pac-Man and the team of U.S. students who created it? Some people think it is a superior game.
I thought they did a fine job of "breaking" the concept that is Pac-Man.

In Pac-Man, you're being chased by ghosts in a labyrinth, which would be pretty scary in real life, so would you consider Pac-Man an early horror game?
The relationship between Pac-Man and the Ghosts isn't something of animosity. On the contrary, the Ghosts are cute and there to bug Pac-Man more than anything. I never expected anyone to think of Pac-Man being akin to a horror game.

In 2007, you developed Pac-Man Championship Edition, which you've said is your last game. What do you think of some of the other Pac-Man titles that have released since then?
I played Pac-Man 256 a number of times, and I think it's one way of exploring Pac-Man. I did find it quite intense without much space to take breathers, though. If I have a chance to make a new Pac-Man game, I'd like to make a game similar to Pac-Man Championship Edition, where the game carries on the legacy of the original Pac-Man with genuine upgrades to the game rules, sense of speed, and graphics.

Do you think you'll ever make another game again?
I've been conducting research at the Tokyo Polytechnic University on the creation of a wearable "Gaming Suit" that has the functionality of a display monitor and controller in one full-body device. I believe this will expand the possibilities of how games can be played, and could promote new art concepts. Though it is indirect, I will continue to participate in ways that breaks the norms of gaming and bring unique ideas to the gaming world.

As a Twin Cities company, *Game Informer* is devastated by the events of recent weeks. We are reeling from the gruesome and unjust death of George Floyd. We offer our condolences to the family and loved ones of George Floyd, and support to the countless other members of the Black community around the country whose pain and loss goes undocumented or unresolved.

Gaming can often act as an escape from the troubles of real life, but for many families, there is no escape from persecution, harassment, and the threat of death. Systemic racism has no place in gaming or in our society.

#BlackLivesMatter

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